

# Beyond the Muscles: Exploring the Meaning and Role of Muscularity in Identity

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**Abstract**

Muscularity is an ever-growing concern and desire for both men and women in modern society. When we think of muscular desires we are instantly drawn to images of large, lean, attractive physiques. A want for a muscular physique, however, is potentially more complex and may be interpreted and expressed differently by various individuals. To better understand this potential diversity, the purpose of this current thesis was to explore the personal meanings of muscularity in those invested in weight training. The research questions that helped address this aim were: What different muscular projects are the participants invested in? How do the participants frame their muscularity in the context of their lives and identities? How do the participants' stories of muscular desire develop over time? Three qualitative studies were conducted to answer these questions; an autoethnography, a life-history study, and an ethnography. Across the studies, 22 participants (including myself) were interviewed and shared the narratives that framed their muscular desires. Additionally, I conducted 16 months of participant observations in two weight lifting gyms. Collecting rich qualitative data from myself and others in different weight training subcultures provided an insight into the personal experiences, the different muscular projects, and the identity-related meanings associated with muscularity.

The first study presents an autoethnography that shares my relationship with muscularity and how a muscular physique became intertwined with a fluid sense of masculinity that permeated several social identities. A strong muscular physique was engrained in my developing masculine identity. This construction of masculinity was initially guided by my observations and interactions with my father and was further shaped by the social comparisons and experiences I faced in different social fields (e.g., sport and the gym). Building muscle became a resource and form of masculine capital that helped me construct my masculinity and address any related conflicts within multiple contexts, such as a rugby player, gym user, and a personal trainer. The autoethnography provides a

personal insight into the development of my muscular desires and their role in constructing and resolving various masculinity-infused identities.

The life-history study shares the stories of 10 male weight trainers. The men appeared to frame their muscular desires within a masculine performance narrative. Like my story, within these men's masculine performances, muscularity was crucial source of masculine capital with which they could construct and act out desired masculine-infused identities (e.g., as men, rugby players, and weight trainers). Additionally, the life-history study presents the different muscular projects that these men invested in, which placed varying emphasis on muscular appearance and functionality. The life-history study also expands on the idea of identity conflicts presented in the autoethnography study and shares 3 realignment narratives that reflected attempts to overcoming threats to masculinity (e.g., injury) and reinstating an overall masculine performances. The life-history study proposes the different narratives men may construct to maintain, protect, and perform their muscular masculine identities

The final ethnographical study demonstrates the sociocultural processes that shaped different subcultural muscular projects and facilitated the construction of distinctive training identities epitomised by varying emphases on muscular appearance and functionality. Additionally, the ethnography shared 3 socially dependent narrative themes (internalist, compensator, and promoter) that represented the meanings assigned to muscularity within the participants' identity performance narratives. The different narrative themes applied to their performance narratives allowed the participants to make sense of their muscular desires in multiple social contexts and draw on muscularity as a form of identity capital. Making sense of their muscularity as a resource for internal strength, compensation, and self-promotion facilitated the construction, mastery, and coherent performance of their multiple identities both inside and outside the weight training environment. The current thesis contributes to the literature by suggesting that muscularity

desires consist of different muscular projects, which have many, broader, identity-related meanings than existing research and conceptualisations may portray.

The building of muscularity appears to be driven by more than superficial aesthetic reasons and not restricted to atavistic masculine identities, as is apparent in existing muscularity literature. Instead the current thesis findings propose that muscularity is a versatile source of identity capital with which individuals can construct, resolve, and perform multiple identities in various social contexts (e.g., occupational, parental, and gendered). It also appears that the narratives that frame the participants' muscular projects and desires are socially constructed over their life course by familial role models (e.g., the father) and the processes within their social fields (e.g., subcultural heroes). The various socially constructed identity narratives and meanings demonstrated in the current studies suggest that people's relationship with muscularity cannot be generalised, which too often is the goal of existing contemporary muscle research. Instead we could benefit from embracing diversity and understanding the broad narratives that encapsulate the different meanings people assign to a muscular physique.

*Keywords: muscularity, masculinity, identity, narrative, weight training*

**Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	i
Acknowledgements .....	x
Dedication .....	xii
List of Tables.....	xiii
List of Abbreviations.....	xiv
List of Appendices .....	xv
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	7
Theoretical Underpinnings.....	7
Erikson’s Psychosocial Development .....	7
Industry vs. inferiority.....	8
Identity vs. role confusion.....	8
Bourdieuian Concepts; Field, Habitus, Tastes, and Capital .....	10
Identity Capital Model .....	13
Body Image .....	16
Height Concerns.....	16
Body Fat Concerns .....	17
Muscularity Concerns .....	17
Drive for Muscularity.....	19
Biological and Demographic Factors.....	19
Sociocultural Factors.....	19
Psychological and Emotional Factors .....	20
Behavioural Factors .....	21

Clinical Variables.....	21
Muscle Dysmorphia .....	22
Issues with DFM and MD .....	24
Going Beyond the Muscles: Context, Culture, and Identities.....	26
Muscular Ideal(s): Voicing Muscular Desires .....	26
Making Sense of Muscle: Cultural Shaping of Muscular Meanings .....	27
Constructing Identities: Muscularity as a Symbolic Resource .....	29
Gaps in the Literature.....	36
Chapter Three: Methodology .....	39
Research Philosophy .....	39
Positivism.....	39
Interpretivism.....	40
The current thesis philosophy.....	40
Qualitative Inquiry .....	41
Methods.....	42
Participant Recruitment.....	44
Data Analysis .....	45
Thematic analysis.....	45
Narrative analysis.....	47
Evaluating Qualitative Research .....	53
Chapter Four: Muscles and Me: An Autoethnography of Muscular Masculinity ...	60
Introduction .....	60
Existing Voices of Muscularity.....	62

BEYOND THE MUSCLES	vi
Muscle and Identity .....	64
Autoethnography: The Power of Storytelling .....	65
Constructing the Story .....	68
Ethical Considerations .....	69
Evaluative Criteria .....	70
Muscles and Me: The Shaping of Muscular Masculinities .....	70
The Evolution of Man: The Birth of Muscular Masculinity .....	70
Size Does Matter: An Emerging Masculine Athlete .....	73
Pumping Iron: Becoming a Gym Rat .....	76
An Occupational Hazard: The Successful Health Professional .....	78
Story Reflections .....	81
A Symbolic Resource; Muscularity as Masculine Capital .....	81
The Birth of Muscular Masculinity; The Role of the Father .....	83
Social Shaping of Muscular Masculinity; Creating Conflicts .....	84
Conclusions .....	86
Chapter Five: “Oh Take Some Man-up Pills”: A Life-History Study of Muscles, Masculinity, and the Threat of Injury .....	90
Introduction .....	90
Method .....	94
Participants .....	94
Procedure and Data Collection .....	95
Data Analysis .....	97
Research Credibility .....	99

Interpretation and Discussion.....	99
“It’s All About Being a Man”; Performing Muscular Masculinity.....	100
Observing a Man; Setting the Masculine Tone.....	102
Constructing a Man; Embodying Muscular Masculinity .....	103
Enacting a Man; Performing Muscular Masculinity .....	106
Realignment Narratives; Three “R’s” of Maintaining Masculine Performance	108
The reliance narrative.....	108
The redemption narrative. ....	113
The relapse narrative. ....	116
Conclusions .....	121
Chapter Six: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Meanings of Muscularity within the Weight Lifting Culture .....	126
Introduction .....	127
Methodology .....	132
Ethnographic context .....	132
Method .....	133
Participant Observations .....	134
Data Analysis .....	137
Hybrid thematic analysis.....	137
Thematic narrative analysis. ....	138
Research Credibility.....	139
Presentation of Findings.....	140
Interpretation and Discussion.....	141



Subcultural Body Projects: Constructing Gym Identities .....	141
Gym geography.....	144
Subcultural heroes.....	147
Subcultural practices. ....	150
Training rituals. ....	151
Subcultural dialect and attire.....	154
Global Identity Performance; Muscularity's Versatility.....	157
Mastery Through Muscle; Three Identity Narrative Themes .....	161
The internalist theme.....	162
The compensator theme. ....	164
The promoter theme. ....	167
Failed Identity Mastery; A Lack of Personal and Social Coherence .....	171
Conclusions .....	175
Future Research.....	180
Limitations .....	181
Chapter Seven: General Discussion .....	187
Thesis Rationale .....	187
Key Findings & Contributions .....	188
What different muscular projects are the participants invested in? .....	188
How do the participants frame their muscularity in the context of their lives and identities? .....	191
Identity performance narratives. ....	193
Narrative misalignment, wreckage, and resolution.....	195

Muscularity as identity capital. ....	197
How do the participants' stories of muscular desire develop over time? .....	199
Familial male role models.....	199
Social field influences.....	200
Conclusions .....	202
Directions for Future Research .....	203
Limitations and Reflections .....	204
Reference List .....	206
Appendix A: Interview Study Risk Assessment .....	240
Appendix B: Interview Study Protocol .....	242
Appendix C: Interview Study Participant Information Sheet .....	246
Appendix D: Interview Study Consent Sheet .....	248
Appendix E: Ethnography Risk Assessment .....	249
Appendix F: Ethnography Study Protocol .....	252
Appendix G: Ethnography Participant Information Sheet .....	255
Appendix H: Ethnography Participant Consent Sheet .....	257
Appendix I: Ethnography Gatekeeper Information Sheet.....	258
Appendix J: Ethnography Gatekeeper Consent Sheet .....	260

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**Dedication**

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**List of Tables**

Figure No.	Title	Page No.
Table 1.	Evaluative criteria and actions taken in the autoethnography.	89
Table 2.	Evaluative criteria and actions taken in the life-history study.	125
Table 3.	Participant demographics and ethnographic interview information.	184
Table 4.	Evaluative criteria and actions taken in the ethnography.	185

**List of Abbreviations**

Abbreviation	Meaning	Page No.
BD	Body dissatisfaction	1
AAS	Anabolic-androgenic steroids	2
DFM	Drive for muscularity	2
MD	Muscle dysmorphia	2
ICM	Identity Capital Model	13
MBAS	Male body attitude scale	16
SPA	Social physique anxiety	17
BMI	Body mass index	19
IPEDs	Image and performance enhancing drugs	21
DMS	Drive for muscularity scale	24
PT	Personal Trainer	35
S&C	Strength and conditioning	191

**List of Appendices**

Appendix	Title	Page No.
A	Interview Study Risk Assessment	240
B	Interview Study Protocol	242
C	Interview Study Participant Information Sheet	246
D	Interview Study Consent Sheet	248
E	Ethnography Risk Assessment	249
F	Ethnography Study Protocol	252
G	Ethnography Participant Information Sheet	255
H	Ethnography Participant Consent Sheet	257
I	Ethnography Gatekeeper Information Sheet	258
J	Ethnography Gatekeeper Consent Sheet	260



## Chapter One: Introduction

The exploration of women has historically dominated the body image literature with a focus on eating disorders and weight-related concerns (Cohane & Pope, 2001; McCreary & Sasse, 2000). The wealth of research on women's drive for thinness inspired the question "what about men?" Whereas women's body ideals focus on thinness, men seem to be concerned more with a muscular ideal (Thompson & Cafri, 2007). A focus on men's appearance concerns, however, is relatively new to body image research (McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Pope, Gruber, Choi, Olivardia, & Phillips 1997; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000a). Generally, body image is "the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one's physical appearance" (Cash, 2004, p. 1). For example, body image can also involve perceptions of (dis)ability and physical ailments, visible or not, which appear to relate to poorer body image (Ben-Tovim & Walker, 1995). Bodily perceptions and the attitudes we develop towards them form the features of body image (Cash, 2004). Self-perceptions and attitudes directed at appearance, specifically, can evoke certain feelings, beliefs, and behaviours, such as dissatisfaction and shame, which can affect psychological well-being (Cash, 2004; Cash, 2012; Tager, Good & Morrison, 2006). Various facets of male body image disturbance exist, such as height, fat, and muscle dissatisfaction, which are commonly explored in the literature (Jones & Crawford, 2005; Tylka, Bergeron & Schwartz, 2005; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005; Tylka et al., 2005).

Seminal works by Pope and colleagues stimulated a growing interest in male appearance concerns and body dissatisfaction (BD), which Pope et al. (2000a) termed "*The Adonis Complex*". The Adonis Complex refers to the male body image concerns that range from minor annoyances through to devastating and life-threatening obsessions and psychiatric disorders (Pope et al., 2000a). A negative body image, such as BD, relates to lower levels of self-acceptance and environmental mastery (Tager et al., 2006). Higher

levels of BD can also have mental health consequences, such as increased levels of depression, eating disorders, and lowered mood and self-esteem (Stice & Shaw, 2002; van de Berg, Mond, Eisenberg, Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010).

Existing research suggests that muscular appearance, specifically, may be a growing source of dissatisfaction and concern for modern men (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Pope, Olivardia, Boroweicki, & Cohane, 2001; Pope et al., 2000a; Schneider, Rollitz, Voracek, & Hennig-Fast, 2016). Societal changes appear to reflect the increasing importance of a muscular physique through an apparent increase in the number of gym subscriptions (Pope et al., 2000a), a muscular evolution of the models in male oriented magazines (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001), and a growth in the use of anabolic androgenic steroids (AAS; Pope, Kanayama, Athey, Ryan, Hudson, & Baggish, 2014; Sagoe, Molde, Andreassen, Torsheim, & Pallesen, 2014). To assess and understand men's experiences, researchers have attempted to conceptualise muscular concerns and the quest for increased muscularity, such as muscle dissatisfaction (Tylka et al., 2005), the drive for muscularity (DFM; McCreary & Sasse, 2000), and muscle dysmorphia (MD; Pope et al., 1997).

Muscle dissatisfaction signifies negative attitudes towards one's level of muscularity (Tylka et al., 2005). Similarly, DFM represents a perception of insufficient muscularity and the behavioural aspects (e.g., engaging in muscle-building activities) that address a perceived lack of muscle mass (McCreary & Sasse, 2000). MD is a clinical preoccupation with muscularity characterised by a distorted view that one's physique is inadequately muscular, which causes significant social and psychological impairment (Olivardia, Pope, & Hudson, 2000; Pope et al., 1997). Muscular dissatisfaction, DFM, and MD all have potentially detrimental effects on psychological health and well-being, such as depression, self-esteem, coping, eating disorders, and substance abuse (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Edwards, Tod & Molnar, 2014; Pope, Pope, Menard, Fay, Olivardia, & Phillips, 2005). The potentially harmful consequences of muscular desires and concerns calls for a better understanding of what muscularity means to people and the influence it

may have on their lives. A better understanding of body image, and specifically muscularity, could help identify the potentially diverse range of influences that may stimulate negative muscular perceptions, result in poorer psychological well-being (e.g., depression and anxiety), and shape behavioural responses (e.g., weight training or substance abuse).

Given the potential importance of muscularity in appearance concerns and the growing interest in the existing literature (Pope, et al., 2000a) the current thesis focuses on this aspect of body image. Muscular desires and projects appear to vary between muscular appearance (e.g., size and tone) and muscular performance (e.g., strength and functionality; Abott and Barber, 2010; Beagan & Saunders, 2005; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Stewart, Smith, & Moroney, 2013). The existing conceptualisations may not be sensitive enough to capture these potentially diverse muscular projects. Instead they attempt to generalise and assume all peoples' desires are centred around visual muscularity. Rather than focus on these specific concepts (e.g., DFM), the current thesis adopts a broader perspective that is suited to embrace and explore the potentially diverse muscular desires in weight training individuals. Exploring muscular desires from this perspective embraces the possible complexity and range of muscular stories present in today's diverse society. Understanding the diversity and multiplicity of people's muscular desires and the role of muscularity in their lives and identities could potentially inform less generalised approaches to exploring and supporting those with a perceived need or want for increased muscle mass.

The overall purpose of the current thesis was to explore the personal meanings behind weight training individuals' muscular desires. This purpose was addressed through the following research questions; What different muscular projects are the participants invested in? How do the participants frame their muscularity in the context of their lives and identities? How do the participants' stories of muscular desire develop over time? Answering these questions and achieving the overall thesis aim could potentially inform

future understandings of, and research into, the potential multiplicity and complexity of muscular desires, and the impact they have on individuals' lives, identities, and behaviours.

The current thesis addressed the current research questions through a series of three qualitative studies that drew on different methodologies; autoethnography, life-history, and ethnography. In recent years there appears to be a lack of rich, qualitative, research that contextualises muscularity within lived experiences and identities, with much of the literature taking quantitative approaches. The existing predominance of quantitative research and focus on generalisation in the contemporary literature provided inspiration for the present series of studies. Firstly, the autoethnography explored my experiences and perceptions of muscularity and its role in my life and identities. The second study then aimed to build on my story, and capture others' personal stories of muscular desires, with a focus on their life-histories and the role and impact of muscularity in their lives and identities. Finally, an ethnography explores a typical muscular culture – the gym – and constructs a portrayal of the sociocultural processes that shape the different muscular projects within different weight training subcultures. Additionally, the ethnography shares the role of muscularity in constructing and performing multiple identities both in and outside the gym.

The following chapter overviews the existing muscularity and relevant masculinity literature. By reviewing the up-to-date literature, I could highlight the gaps and areas in need of further research. These gaps in knowledge informed the purpose of the current thesis and facilitated the development of the present series of studies, with the goal of contributing to the muscularity literature and suggesting future avenues of research.

Chapter three overviews the general methodology used throughout the current PhD studies. Within chapter three I detail the epistemological and ontological perspectives, provide a general description of the participants, methods, and procedures used, and offer a discussion of the credibility criteria that guided my research.

Chapter four presents the autoethnography that addresses the second two research questions by sharing the ongoing social construction of my muscular experiences, perceptions, and desires, and their role in my life and identities. Specifically, it presents an insight into how my muscular desires were shaped by the social observations, interactions, and comparisons with my father and surrounding environments. Additionally, my story shares how muscularity became part of my many masculinity-infused identities, and influenced my daily life, interactions, and behaviours. Through understanding myself, I could better understand, empathise with, and contextualise others' lives and experiences in the subsequent studies. My story provides a view into one man's experience of muscular concerns and desires that may resonate with others and stimulate new questions for muscularity research. Additionally, I could create a transparency for readers that helps comprehend my values and the interpretations I make in subsequent studies.

Through life-history interviews chapter five builds on the autoethnography and explored others' stories of muscularity and its role in their masculine-infused identities as weight trainers and sporting athletes. The life-history study provided further awareness of the diverse lived-experiences (e.g., father-son and sporting interactions) that were associated with, and shaped, the men's varied muscular desires and projects. Specifically, the study offered an insight into the masculine performance narratives that the men ascribed to, which guided the men's muscular embodiment of masculinity, behaviours, and responses to threats to their identity performances (e.g., injury). Embracing diversity and sharing different symbolic roles of muscularity in individuals' identities could help minimise preconceived or overgeneralised assumptions about men's muscular concerns.

Chapter six broadened the scope of the thesis to ethnographically explore the influence of the weight training culture discussed in the previous two studies. The purpose was to further understand the various muscular projects and meanings within the weight training culture and how the gym environment and its sociocultural processes may contribute to their construction. The ethnography offers a descriptive insight into the

diversity of the weight training culture and the various subcultures that uphold it (e.g., bodybuilders and powerlifters). Through immersing myself in these subcultures, I became aware of the different muscular projects and meanings that guided the individuals' bodily desires. These varied projects were reflected in the values and behaviours expressed by each subculture, which aided the construction of different training identities. My interaction with the range of individuals in these subcultures also demonstrated how muscularity was part of more global identity performance narratives that aided the construction, mastery, and enactment of multiple identities in various social contexts.

Conducting the autoethnography, life-history study, and ethnography offered several contributions to the existing literature. A combined understanding of mine and others' personal stories, the weight training environment, and the social shaping of muscular desires adds insight into the value muscularity holds in individuals' lives and identities. In doing so, the current thesis informs future research of the importance of embracing the diversity of people's relationships with, and meanings for, muscularity. The current studies suggest that, although many people may desire a more muscular physique, attempting to generalise and confine the quest (or drive) for muscularity to a distinct concept may potentially overlook the versatility and complexity of muscularity's role in many people's lives and identities.

Chapter seven collectively discusses the key findings for the overall thesis, demonstrates the overall contribution to the existing knowledge, makes suggestions on future directions for muscularity research, and reflects on the limitations of the current thesis.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The following chapter discusses the theoretical underpinnings that informed the interpretations of the current PhD studies. These theoretical concepts are discussed both generally and within the context of the current thesis. Additionally, a broad review of literature is conducted, which includes several areas of research, such as body image, drive for muscularity, muscle dysmorphia, the general muscularity and appropriate masculinity research.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Three theoretical concepts informed the interpretation of muscularity's meanings and roles within individuals' lives and identities throughout the current PhD studies. These were the theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1959), Bourdieu's concepts of social field, habitus, taste, and cultural capital (1986a, 1986b, 1990, 2001), and the identity capital model (Côté, 1996, 2016).

#### **Erikson's Psychosocial Development**

Erikson's (1959) proposes the theory of psychosocial development, which consists of eight stages and conflicts that individuals must resolve systematically throughout the lifespan. These conflicts represent a balancing of the needs of the individual and their social relations, which facilitate effective identity and personality development (Erikson, 1959, 1994). Each successful resolution results in the acquisition of basic virtues or strengths that are useful in resolving future crises. The eight conflicts are; trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and ego integrity vs. despair. Of the eight conflicts experienced over the lifespan, this chapter discusses two of these (industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion) based on existing research and the current participant's stories. For example, research suggests that building muscle potentially supports a person's perception of competency (e.g., Sparkes et al., 2005) and their

construction of masculine identities and roles (e.g., masculinity; e.g., Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993, 1995).

**Industry vs. inferiority.** The conflict between industry and inferiority is suggested to occur between the ages of five and twelve years-old. At this stage children will be more aware of their peer groups, which become more significant and a source of self-esteem and encourages them to feel the need to compete and demonstrate specific skills and capabilities (Erikson, 1959, 1994). Observing the socially valued skills and characteristics of their peers shapes an individual's perception of what is expected and needed for them to achieve success and win approval (Erikson, 1959, 1994). Successful resolution of this conflict through the demonstration of appropriate skills and characteristics results in a feeling and virtue of competency.

A failure to resolve this conflict is suggested to result in a sense of inferiority. In relation to the current thesis, an awareness of peers, victimisation, and derogatory interactions may stimulate bodily comparisons, such as muscularity, and fuel a desire to be more muscular to match and compete with those around them (e.g., Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005). Muscle does appear to be a defining feature of a successful body, decrease any feelings of inadequacy, and allow the embodiment of competency (Monaghan, 2002; Sparkes et al., 2005). By developing a socially accepted and successful body through muscularity may help minimise any perceived inferiority, successfully resolve the conflict, and enhance the perception of competency. The muscular embodiment of competency is often associated with a masculine identity (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; de Visser, Smith, & McDonnell, 2009), which may also suggest that muscularity is a useful resource throughout the other identity-specific stages of development proposed by Erikson (1959), such as identity vs. role confusion.

**Identity vs. role confusion.** The identity vs. role confusion conflict is said to arise between twelve and eighteen years-old. It is in this stage Erikson (1959) suggests that individuals will seek to develop a sense of self, personal identity, and draw on their



personal values, beliefs, and goals. Resolving this conflict should result in a developed sense of self, confirm what an individual wants to do and be, and a commitment to an appropriate sex role (Bee, 1992; Erikson, 1959, 1994). As is evident in the literature, some young men may centre their developing identity and sex roles around masculinity and imitate the values, beliefs, and goals from the people around them (e.g., fathers, brothers, and peers; Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005). For example, some existing research demonstrates the potential fatherly and sibling emphasis on physical stature, muscularity, and strength as symbolic representations of respected masculinity (Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005).

A failed resolution of this stage and an unclear identity formation can lead to role confusion, whereby the individual will be unsure about where they fit in society resulting in an identity crisis or distress (Erikson, 1959; Kamps & Berman, 2011). Identity distress refers to the “inability to reconcile aspects of the self into a coherent and acceptable sense of self” (American Psychiatric Association, 1980 p.65). Identity distress has been correlated with appearance and body concerns, and it is suggested that lacking a firm sense of identity may stimulate anxiety and accentuate concerns of bodily aspects (Kamps & Berman, 2011).

In relation to the current thesis, any confusion or distress in an individual’s identity (e.g., masculinity) may stimulate concerns about, and desires for, increasing levels of muscle mass. For example, Klein (1993, 1995) proposes that men may use their muscularity to address conflicts in their masculine identities and rebalance any sense of threat or distress within their perceived role as a man. Drawing on various masculine domains (e.g., sport) to enhance masculinity or compensate for marginalised behaviours or characteristics have been termed masculine “credit” (de Visser & Smith, 2006 p.691) and “insurance” (Anderson, 2002 p.865). Like Klein’s (1993) proposal, one area of masculine credit described within the literature is a man’s physical prowess, represented by a muscular physique (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013). Muscle appears

to be synonymous with constructing masculine ideals, coping with identity distresses and threats, and helps achieve a positive sense of self (Klein, 1993; Sparkes et al., 2005).

Muscularity, therefore, may be a valuable symbolic resource that can aid interaction between the body and self-identity, help resolve identity conflicts, and minimise or address role confusion (Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Shilling, 2013). The notion of building muscularity as a valuable resource reflects Bourdieu's (1986a, 1986b, 1990) concept of capital and offers a theoretical basis for muscularity's role within identity.

Muscular development could potentially help provide some individuals with the resources to resolve certain identity conflicts, overcome any past feelings of fragility and inadequacy, and achieve a more positive sense of self (e.g., accepted masculine identity; Sparkes et al., 2005). Erikson's (1959) theory has yet to be applied to the muscularity literature but may serve as a useful backdrop for interpreting people's muscular desires in conjunction with their identity constructions and resolutions.

### **Bourdieuian Concepts; Field, Habitus, Tastes, and Capital**

The process by which muscularity comes to be perceived as a valuable resource in some individuals' lives may reflect Bourdieuian ideas. According to Bourdieu (1986a), the generation of socially specific practices, such as weight training and building muscle, are constructed and not passively inherited. Bourdieu (1986a, 1990) coined the terms *field*, *habitus*, *taste*, and *cultural capital* to describe the contextual settings, dispositions, preferences, and resources respectively, which all interact to shape an individual's practices; [(habitus)(capital) + field] = practice] (Bourdieu, 1986a, p. 101). The social field represents the settings in which agents interact and establish social positions (1986a, 1990). These social fields are often governed by their own rules, beliefs, and values, which need to be developed and adhered to establish a favoured social position (1986a). Habitus, specifically, are cognitive and motivational structures that convert into dispositions or schemes of perception that inform one's socially "meaningful practices" (Bourdieu, 1986a p.170). Generally, in the current thesis, habitus may represent the attitudes, values, and

beliefs associated with muscularity. These dispositions or habitus are developed through regular exposure to particular social situations and interaction with others (Bourdieu, 1986a). For example, men may interact within a given social field or culture (e.g., the gym) and absorb the meaningful attitudes, beliefs, and characteristics (e.g., perceptions of a culturally acceptable muscular physique) that are perceived as being the “norm” (Coquet et al., 2016; Monaghan, 1999; Shilling, 2013). These attitudes, beliefs, and characteristics then guide appropriate practices and behaviours (e.g., weight training).

These social learning experiences can also inform the generation of individual preferences in relation to the desired or required habitus, referred to as taste (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1990). In the context of existing research and the current thesis, the types of behaviours, attitudes, and characteristics (e.g., the acceptable physique or type of training) engrained into a man’s identity becomes their taste and is shaped by the perceived requirements within the his social fields (Edwards et al., 2017; Monaghan, 1999). An individual’s taste represents the preferences they form and a conscious display of particular habitus (Bourdieu, 1986a; Edwards et al., 2017; Shilling, 2013). The development of taste is also a result of the perceived availability of useful and meaningful resources, which are referred to as capital (Bourdieu, 1986a, 2001; Shilling, 2013).

Capital are the resources that hold social symbolic value, produce positive effects, and represent the power held by individuals within the associated social field (Bourdieu, 1986a; Laberge, 1995). Various forms of capital include economic (monetary), social (social connections), and cultural (social specific assets). Bourdieu (1986b) proposed three forms of cultural capital; objectified, institutionalised, and embodied. Objectified cultural capital refers to material resources and goods, such as books, machines, instruments. The institutionalized form is associated with educational and professional qualifications. Finally, the embodied state cultural capital refers to the qualities of the mind and body, such as a muscular physique in the current thesis. Capital can be accumulated, lost, and exchanged for social status, success, and mobility (de Visser et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1986a,

1986b, 1990). To aid exchanges all forms of capital can be converted into symbolic capital (resources of power and status), which occurs when a form of capital (economic, social, or cultural) becomes recognised, accepted, and legitimised within a given social field (Bourdieu, 1986b). For example, muscularity may be a symbolic form of embodied cultural capital within the gym as it is a recognised and respected resource that can improve an individual's status (Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Klein, 1993; Stewart et al., 2013).

The current thesis seeks to further explore the potential role of muscularity as a form of cultural capital, and the different habitus and tastes that may be present in the weight training subcultures. Existing studies that draw on the work of Bourdieu, suggest muscularity as different forms of symbolic, cultural, capital, such as physical (Shilling, 1991), bodily (Wacquant, 1995), gendered (Bridges, 2009), and masculine (de Visser et al., 2009). Physical capital represents the body-focused form of embodied state cultural capital, which can relate to both performance and appearance (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1990) and has been explored in the context of health and exercise (Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Harvey, Vachhani, & Williams, 2014; Hutson, 2013). Bodily capital is a subset of physical capital that focuses more of physical appearance (Edmonds, 2018; Wacquant, 1995). Gender capital reflects the resources that can validate gendered identities (e.g., masculinity; Bridges, 2009). Similarly, masculine capital reflects a male-specific resource that can enhance one's masculinity and compensate for non-masculine behaviours or characteristics (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013). Within all of these forms of capital, the body, and specifically muscularity, appears to be a common and valuable asset, which informed the use of Bourdieu's concept of capital in the current thesis to understand individuals' muscular desires.

There appears to be varying views and perceptions of muscularity as cultural capital within the literature, with some men placing more symbolic value on muscular ability rather than appearance (de Visser et al., 2009). Other researchers propose that in an

increasing consumer culture, a muscular looking body is becoming more valuable (Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005). Given the social influence on people's taste (Andreasson, 2014; Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993) and the potentially different cultural values placed on muscularity as capital (e.g., physical strength or visual aesthetics), the contrast in perceptions of muscle may suggest that multiple discourses are present (Monaghan, 1999). Specifically, the various subcultures that make up the weight training environment (e.g., powerlifters, bodybuilders, and recreational trainers etc.) may shape different habitus, tastes, and the symbolic value and meaning of muscularity as a form of capital. The current thesis could embrace this multiplicity and help share the diverse narratives that frame and guide individuals' muscular desires as part of their identities.

One's physique appears to play a symbolic role as capital in multiple identities. For example, possessing the various proposed forms of capital (through the body) appears to influence individuals' gym, occupational, and masculine identities (e.g., bodybuilders, police officers, and health and fitness professionals; Diphooorn, 2015; Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013; Phoenix, 2015). The potential versatility and multiple roles and meanings associated with muscularity may call for a more universal and flexible interpretation of capital that can encompass various contexts for embodied cultural capital (e.g., masculine and physical capital). A more universal, versatile, and transferable form of capital means the interpretation of resources, such as muscularity, will not be confined to one context or identity (e.g., masculinity). Recent research has considered this need for versatile forms of capital that are not confined by exclusive cultural codes, which informed the proposal of the identity capital model (ICM; Côté, 1996, 2016).

### **Identity Capital Model**

A transition through societal structures, from pre- to late-modern societies, has stimulated a change in how individuals construct and express their identities (Côté, 1996). Côté (1996, 2016) proposes that in today's society (late-modern) social roles and statuses

are no longer simply ascribed, and there is a diminished structure in place, meaning there is no clear “pathway” for individuals to create a sense of identity. Instead, identity construction is a more complex task that encourages people to individualise their identities, continually construct their sense of self, and adapt to obstacles and opportunities that arise within their ever-changing social lives (Côté, 2016). This complexity and individualisation may account for the emergence of more inclusive and varied masculine identities (Anderson, 2005; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Hall, 2014), but also encourages a consideration of the multiplicity of identity and the need to understand how individuals manage their multiple identities and changing environmental roles.

The ICM recognises the social and cultural mobility individuals are faced with in modern society and the need to understand the cultural codes of their various social contexts (Côté, 2016). Subsequently, Côté (1996, 2016) suggests a more universal form of capital, unrestricted by social or cultural boundaries, that can be developed over time. Identity capital can provide agency within, and successful negotiation of, various social contexts in a volatile late-modern society (Côté, 2016). Identity capital is broadly categorised into sociological and psychological resources. Sociological resources are associated with tangible and socially visible concepts, such as wealth, professional networks, and reputations. Psychological resources are associated with intangible concepts, such as self-esteem, critical thinking abilities, and cognitive reasoning, (Côté, 2016). The combination of both forms of capital appear to provide individuals with the agency and ability to negotiate the uncertainty and unpredictability of late-modern society, which minimises the risk of social exclusion, hindered development, and contributes to a coherent identity (Côté, 1996; Côté & Levine, 2002, 2016; Côté, 2016).

Organisational structures, such as education, have benefited from the ICM, and it has helped propose the benefit of developing personal, social, and economic resources for the transition between education and work. Some researchers demonstrate the usefulness of the ICM for understanding sociocultural environments and structures in which people have

various identities and demographic backgrounds (e.g., university and education; Côté & Allahar, 2007, 2011). Alongside its benefit of explaining life transitions, ICM may also have potential benefits in minimising health-risk behaviours (e.g., drug misuse; Schwartz, Forthun, Ravert, Zamboanga, Umaña-Taylor, Filton, Kim, Rodriguez, Weisskirch, Vernon, Shneyderman, Williams, Agocha, & Hudson 2010b; Côté, 2016). Schwartz et al. (2010b) suggest that achieving consistency across aspects of one's identities and minimising role confusion appeared to be related to lowered risk-taking behaviour in college-age individuals. Based on existing findings, providing the resources (identity capital) to assign, consolidate, and achieve consistency in identity-related roles may aid healthy identity construction and minimise health risk behaviours.

In the current thesis, muscularity may represent a sociological or tangible form of identity capital, that could help substantiate one's sense of purpose and identity, enhance their role competence, and potentially improve their feeling of content and well-being. If so, the gym, weightlifting, and associated quests for muscle may then play a part in this concept of identity capital and the management of the multiple identities gym goers often possess. The ICM, however, has yet to be applied to the study of body image constructs, such as muscularity desires. Applying the ICM to muscularity research could potentially inform an insight into the broader meanings that individuals assign to muscle and its utility in managing multiple identities. Specifically, using ICM could embrace existing research perspectives, such as masculinity (de Visser et al., 2009; Klein, 1993) and other gym-based identities (e.g., PT's; Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013; Phoenix, 2015), but also inform the research of other identity-related reasons for desiring a muscular physique and the versatility of muscle as a useful identity resource.

Using the aforementioned theoretical concepts, the current thesis sought to understand what muscularity means to individuals invested in weight training and muscle-building activities and what role it plays in their multiple identities. Before reviewing the

existing muscularity literature, I provide some context for muscularity and its place within the field of body image.

### **Body Image**

An apparent interest in, and assessment of, men's concerns with appearance has emerged in the body image literature (Tylka et al., 2005). Men appear to be under more pressure to "look good" and believe that their bodies define their masculinity (Brown, 1999; Monaghan, 2002; Pope et al., 2000). A range of concerns plague men's body image, such as the amount of head and body hair, penis size, height, body fat, and muscularity (Pope et al., 2000; Tiggemann, Martins & Churchett, 2008). According to a survey in 1997 the percentage of American men dissatisfied with their overall appearance had nearly tripled in three decades from 15% to 43% (Garner, 1997; Pope et al. 2000). This figure may potentially be even higher in today's image-focused society. The concerns and BD some men have appear to be associated with several psychological and behavioural factors, such as self-concept, self-esteem (Cohane & Pope, 2001), and disordered eating (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004), which calls for a further research into various aspects of men's body image.

Existing measures designed to specifically address men's concerns with body image include the commonly cited Male Body Attitudes Scale (MBAS; Tylka et al., 2005). The MBAS focuses on three key features of male body image; height, body fat, and muscle (Cafri & Thompson, 2004; Cohane & Pope, 2001; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005).

### **Height Concerns**

Height is a key aspect of male body image and common source of concern, whereby men typically desire to be taller. Men express being short as an undesirable trait and it is predictive of overall BD and worry (Frederick, Peplau & Lever, 2006; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005; Tiggemann et al., 2008). Aspects of body image, such as height, may reflect masculinity for some men leading to a distorted self-report in these areas to enhance their "manly" identities (Bogaert & McCreary, 2011). A dissatisfaction with height appears



to correlate with negative psychological well-being, coping (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007), depression (Blashill, 2010), self-esteem (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Tiggemann et al., 2008), social sensitivity, and eating concerns (Blashill, 2010). The current literature would suggest that perceptions of height contribute to overall BD and can cause significant psychological, social, and behavioural distress.

### **Body Fat Concerns**

Men's levels of body fat also contribute to overall body image. Existing findings suggest that some men report a desire to lower their body fat levels and show a trepidation towards being "heavy" or "flabby" (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005; Tiggemann et al., 2008; Vartanian Giant, & Passino, 2001). Like a lack of height, higher levels of body fat correlate with several psychological features such as lowered psychological well-being, coping, hardiness (Blashill, 2010), and self-esteem (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Hildebrandt, Langenbucher & Schlundt, 2004; Tiggemann et al., 2007; Tylka et al., 2005). Possessing more body fat also has psychosocial consequences for men such as higher social physique anxiety (SPA; Hildebrandt et al., 2004), and social sensitivity (Blashill, 2010). Some concerning consequences of men's negative perceptions of their body fat levels are greater depression (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Blashill, 2010) and occurrence of eating pathologies (Blashill, 2010; Tylka et al., 2005), which warrants a better understanding of male body image. Potential reasons for desiring low levels of body fat are to avoid stigmatization and stereotyping, as well as revealing one's muscularity to resemble a desired mesomorphic ideal (Hildebrandt et al., 2004).

### **Muscularity Concerns**

Existent findings suggest that many men are dissatisfied with their levels of muscularity, with some possessing an active desire to be more muscular (Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005; Tiggemann et al., 2008). Notably, a dissatisfaction with muscle tone has increase by 20% since the 1970's (Garner, 1997), which fits with the growing expenditure

on exercise equipment, gym memberships, and nutritional supplementation (Pope et al., 2000a). Such findings demonstrate the potentially growing concern men have with their muscularity and its centrality within male body image (Pope et al., 2000a). Being dissatisfied with one's muscularity appears to correlate with several factors, psychological well-being (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007), depression, social sensitivity, and eating concerns (Blashill, 2010). These potential relationships are concerning given that many young boys and men appear to perceive themselves as being underdeveloped and lacking muscle mass (Cohane & Pope, 2001; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). For example, some men report a significant disparity between their ideal muscular body and current physiques (Olivardia et al., 2004; Pope, Gruber, Mangweth, Bureau, deCol, Jouvent, & Hudson, 2000b). Findings report men expressing current-ideal disparities of between 27 and 29 pounds, and desiring bodies with an additional 25 pounds (11.34 kgs) of muscle, and 8 pounds (3.63 kgs) less body fat (Olivardia et al., 2004; Pope et al., 2000b). The perceived lack of muscle can lead to a desire for increased muscularity and lower levels of body fat (Cohane & Pope, 2001; Vartanian et al., 2001).

DFM is a term that aims to conceptualise and capture the perceptual features of muscular concerns and the behavioural and motivational characteristics expressed to address a perceived lack of muscularity (McCreary & Sasse, 2000). Similarly, the concept of MD aims to clinically bracket and pathologise those who are significantly preoccupied with the muscularity, which causes them notable psychological and social impairment (Pope et al., 1997, 2000a). A dissatisfaction with muscularity, however, does not mean there is necessarily a desire to be more muscular. Individuals can be unhappy with their appearance, but they may not be driven to do anything about it and it may not have any significant impact on their daily lives. Next, I offer an overview of the DFM and MD literature and propose the potential limitations of these concepts. I also provide some insight into the general muscle literature and muscularity's association with identity. Reviewing this literature helps propose the need to adopt a less generalised view of

muscularity concerns by embracing the diversity of personal, subjective, and individual experiences.

### **Drive for Muscularity**

Existing reviews (e.g., Edwards et al., 2014) and theoretical perspectives of DFM (e.g., biopsychosocial framework; Diehl & Baghurst, 2016) reveal a range of associated variables, including biological, sociocultural, psychological and emotional, behavioural, and clinical variables (Diehl & Baghurst, 2016; Edwards et al., 2014). Within these variables are a plethora of individual factors all proposed to have a relationship with DFM, which indicates the potential complexity of DFM and more broadly muscularity-related perceptions and behaviours.

### **Biological and Demographic Factors**

Existing research suggests DFM correlates with several biological and demographic variables, such as gender, age, sexuality, body mass index (BMI), and athletic status (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Diehl & Baghurst, 2016; Duggan & McCreary, 2004; McCreary, Saucier, & Courtenay, 2005; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). Despite men and women, and athletes and non-athletes, engaging in weight training activities, it appears that men and athletic populations report higher levels of DFM (McCreary et al., 2005; Pritchard & Nielsen, 2014; Steinfeldt, Carter, Benton, & Steinfeldt 2011a; Tiggemann, 2005; Zelli et al., 2010;). There are mixed findings regarding the relationships between BMI, sexuality, and DFM. Some suggest gay men report a higher DFM (Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003) and that lower BMI's positively correlate with DFM in gay men, but not straight men (Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbride, 2007).

### **Sociocultural Factors**

Existing theories (e.g., sociocultural theory) place emphasis on sociocultural influences, such as the media and peer interactions, as key contributors to DFM (Morrison, Morrison, & Hopkins 2003). Specifically, the exposure to, and internalisation of, increasingly muscular ideals within society provides an emphasis on muscularity (Leit et

al., 2001; Morrison et al., 2003). This emphasis along with the attribution of muscularity to desirable features, such as romantic success and gender attributes, encourage social comparisons, which influence the muscular self-perceptions of many men (Jung, Forbes, & Chan, 2010; Morrison et al., 2003; Morrison, Morrison, & McCann, 2006; Shomaker & Furman, 2010; Smolak & Stein, 2006, 2010). For example, seeing muscular images, experiencing pressure to gain weight from others, and conflicts with societal expectations (e.g., masculinity) all appear to be linked to increased DFM (Diehl & Baghurst, 2016; Morrison et al., 2003; Galli, Petrie, Reel, Chatterton, & Baghurst, 2014; Galli, Reel, Petrie, Greenleaf, & Carter, 2011; Galli, Petrie, Reel, Greenleaf, & Carter, 2015; Shomaker & Furman, 2010; Smolak & Stein, 2006, 2010).

### **Psychological and Emotional Factors**

Several psychological variables have been associated with DFM, such as a low self-esteem (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Cafri, van de Berg, & Thompson, 2006; Chittester & Hausenblas, 2009; Nowell & Ricciadelli, 2008; Smolak & Stein, 2006; Tylka et al., 2005), personality (e.g., high perfectionism and neuroticism; Benford & Swami, 2014; Davis, Karvinen, & McCreary, 2005), and BD (Edwards et al., 2014; Greentree & Lewis, 2011; Hallsworth, Wade, & Tiggemann, 2005; Jones & Crawford, 2005; Martins et al., 2007). There is a variation in the assessment tools used to measure psychological variables, however, which may influence some inconsistency in the literature (Edwards et al., 2014).

Two commonly researched emotional factors in the DFM literature are negative affect and anxiety. Negative affect appears to be a significant correlate of DFM (Cafri et al., 2006; Galli et al. 2015; Lavender, Gratz, & Anderson, 2012). Measures of negative affect, however, may be too general and not provide insight into the specific emotions that may individuals may attribute to their muscularity concerns, such as feelings of guilt, fear, hostility, and sadness (Petrie, Galli, Greenleaf, Reel, & Carter, 2014).

The relationship between DFM, appearance anxiety, and social physique anxiety is unclear in the literature (Edwards et al., 2014). Some research has shown that both

appearance anxiety and social physique anxiety (SPA) are positively correlated with DFM and perceived muscularity (Hallsworth et al., 2005; Martin Ginis, Eng, Arbour, Hartman, & Phillips, 2005; Martins et al., 2007; Thomas, Tod, Edwards, & McGuigan, 2014), but other studies have failed to find significant correlations (Martin, Kliber, Kulinna, & Fahlman, 2006). The potential influence of traditional masculinity on men, however, may prompt them not to divulge any negative emotions or anxiety associated with their physique through fear of displaying emotional weakness.

### **Behavioural Factors**

An increased DFM has been correlated with several behavioural features, such as weight training and bodybuilding (Diehl & Baghurst, 2016; Edwards et al., 2014; McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Tod & Edwards, 2015), weight monitoring (Galli, Petrie, & Chatterton, 2017), and dietary manipulation with a particular focus on gaining weight, restricted eating patterns, and supplement use (Chittester & Hausenblas, 2009; Cafri et al., 2006; Fortes, Lira, de Carvalho, Ferreira, & Almeida, 2017; McPherson, McCarthy, McCreary, & McMillan, 2010; Smolak & Stein, 2010; Thomas et al., 2014). Additionally, the use of image and performance enhancing substances (IPEDs), such as anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS), are also commonly related to DFM (Parent & Moradi, 2011). Links with substance use demonstrates some of the riskier behaviours potentially associated with muscular desires. Not every person, however, will adopt the same pattern of behaviours. Some may not engage in any of the discussed activities yet still be concerned about their physique, which questions why some people invest so much in training, dieting, or engaging in risky behaviours and others do not. To better understand muscle-related behaviours we need to allow individuals to provide their experiences, meanings, and motivations in their own words.

### **Clinical Variables**

Several clinical variables have been reported to correlate with DFM, such as depressive symptoms, psychological distress (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007), and eating

disorders (e.g., bulimic symptoms; Hallsworth et al. 2005; Petrie et al., 2014). The potential links between such variables and DFM indicates the potential detriment muscular concerns may pose to mental-health and psychological well-being (Edwards et al., 2014). Evidence for such relationships, however, is limited and like the emotional factors may be influenced by the taboo that men should not share their feelings or potential weaknesses (Pope et al., 2000; Shepard & Rickard, 2012).

DFM seems to also correlate with muscle-specific conditions, such as MD, which represents a more extreme preoccupation with, and distorted perspective of, one's muscularity (Diehl & Baghurst, 2016; Robert, Munroe-Chandler, & Gammage, 2009; Thomas et al., 2014). Despite being different concepts, DFM and MD suggest a variance in the intensity of muscular concerns, which justifies the need to understand all levels of muscularity perceptions not just those who may display a "drive" or clinical "preoccupation".

### **Muscle Dysmorphia**

Pope et al. (1993, 1997) pioneered the interest in MD and suggested the psychological and social impairment associated with excessive preoccupations with muscularity. MD and DFM are often confused, but they are separate concepts and are not interchangeable. For example, an individual can possess a high DFM without experiencing the preoccupation and associated impairment characterised by MD. A high DFM does, however, seem to predict MD symptomatology (Robert et al., 2009). The potential predictive relationship between DFM and MD may pose questions for future research regarding the development of the muscular concerns, but currently the existing understanding of how and when muscular concerns and related concepts occur are limited. Some researchers speculate that the onset of the MD occurs at approximately 19-years-old (Olivardia, 2001; Olivardia et al., 2000; Pope et al., 1997).

In attempts to understand MD, some researchers have proposed conceptual models and have drawn on a network of relationships (see Cafri, Thompson, Ricciardelli, McCabe,

Smolak, & Yesalis 2005; Grieve, 2007; Lantz, Rhea, & Mayhew, 2001; Tod & Lavallee, 2010). Similarly, existing quantitative research propose several relationships between MD and various factors. These include biological and demographic (e.g., age, weight, training status, and BMI; Cafri et al., 2005; Diehl & Baghurst, 2016; Grieve, 2007), sociocultural (e.g., peer, family, and media pressures; Diehl & Baghurst, 2016), psychological (e.g., anxiety, negative affect, perfectionism; Diehl & Baghurst, 2016; Grieve, 2007 Thomas et al., 2014), behavioural (e.g., body checking, substance abuse, weight lifting; Cafri et al., 2005; Walker, Anderson, & Hildebrandt, 2009), and clinical factors (e.g., depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, eating disorders; Maida & Armstrong, 2005). There appears to be a lack of consistency within the quantitative research that leaves our understanding of MD development and consequences relatively unclear.

Some researchers have pursued qualitative approaches to explore MD in an attempt to understand life with the condition. Work by Murray and colleagues demonstrates the intricacies of the training and diet-related behaviours that may be attributed to MD (e.g., bingeing, purging, and compulsive exercise) and how these behaviours may both impact daily life (such as interference with religious practices and avoidance of social occasions; Murray, Rieger, & Touyz, 2011) and serve as a regulatory tool for managing muscle-related negative emotions. (Murray, Maguire, Russell, & Touyz, 2012). Similarly, a self-reflection by Tim Baghurst (2012) provides an insight into some of the personal developmental factors associated with his experience of MD, referring to several family, school, and gym-related experiences. Additionally, Pope et al. (1997, 2000a) also share multiple case studies that contextualise the way muscularity consumes some men's lives, and specifically their thoughts, social lives, and relationships. For example, some men will avoid public restaurants because of strict dietary regimen, and others discuss losing friends or romantic partners through a prioritisation of lifting weights and body checking (Pope et al., 1993, 1997, 2000a). Despite these existing cases and their value in sharing personal

experiences, there is still a lack of insight into individual variations in the muscle-related influences, meanings, and consequences that people may encounter.

### **Issues with DFM and MD**

One potential issue with conceptualising muscularity may be a pathologising of muscular concerns, which may encourage an overgeneralisation. Additionally, existing DFM and MD research predominantly adopts a positivist perspective, which is grounded in objective and logical truths. These positivist assumptions and the existing dominance of quantitative cross-sectional research lacks contextual understanding of the potentially diverse personal and social experiences associated with muscularity concerns and desires. Specifically, the existing methodological approaches also tend to be researcher led and involve predetermined criteria and variables. The existing measures and the current generalisation and conceptualisation of muscular perceptions (e.g., DFM and MD) may not be sensitive enough to capture the diverse reasons and stories behind different individuals' desire for muscularity. The existent methodological approaches and perspectives leave little room for the voice of those who have some investment in muscularity or those who live with muscularity concerns. Limiting participant voices hinders the understanding of the potentially complex nature of muscular perceptions and desires. By adopting positivist perspectives and seeking generalisation through specific concepts we fail to embrace the potentially different meanings, underpinning stories, and motives behind people's quest for muscularity (e.g., identity).

Although valuable to research, DFM and MD are only parts of a muscularity picture. People's muscular perceptions may occur and impact them in different ways, which may influence various levels of concern, desires, and behaviours associated with muscularity. The potential variation in the meanings behind one's muscular perceptions and desires may mean that not everybody will meet the specific "criteria" for DFM or MD. The confinement to a conceptual label (e.g., DFM) and the general, predetermined, and assumed characteristics used to examine it, such as attitudinal and behavioural aspects of



the drive for muscularity scale (DMS, e.g., “I think that I would look better if I gained 10 pounds in bulk” and “I lift weights to build up muscle”; McCreary & Sasse, 2000), risk overlooking the complexity, variability, and deeper meanings associated with muscular desires within people’s lives.

Muscular desires can be driven by different goals and motives and appear to alter across the lifespan (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Younger, adolescent boys appear to primarily focus on increasing weight and muscle size, whereas older men appear to shift their focus towards increasing muscle tone and strength (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). These findings may suggest a change in context for individuals’ muscular desires from appearance driven motives to more functionality and bodily health and capacity throughout the life course (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Not embracing multiple realities, meanings, and experiences limits our understanding of the diverse motives and socially dependent contexts that may underpin the desires and quests for muscularity. Similarly, we cannot comprehend the varying role muscularity (and its specific context; e.g., function) may play in different social and demographic groups and their various identities.

I do not intend to dismiss existing DFM or MD research as they are both valuable concepts. The current thesis, however, conveys the idea that the confinement of muscular perceptions and desires to a single concept may overgeneralise people’s relationships with muscularity. Such a generalised, positivist, perspective potentially limits our broader understanding of individuals’ personal muscular desires and associated behaviours. Instead we may be better suited (from a research viewpoint) to adopt interpretivist perspectives, assumptions, and qualitative methodologies, such as life-history and ethnography, which allow more room for participant voices. The interpretivist perspective assumes subjective truths and embraces individual meaning and experience. By embracing diversity and individuality, we can better contextualise muscular concerns and capture the socially constructed importance of, and desire for, muscularity in individuals’ lives and identities.

**Going Beyond the Muscles: Context, Culture, and Identities**

Existing, positivist, muscularity research appears to assume that people's perceptions and desires generally represent a superficial want for large muscles and increased muscle mass and does not provide any sociocultural context or personal meaning to people's muscular desires (Edwards et al., 2014; McCreary and Sasse, 2000). Some existing qualitative research, however, has offered insight into self-voiced perceptions of muscularity, the cultural influence on muscular perceptions, and the identity-related meanings behind individuals' muscular desires (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Coquet, Ohl, & Roussel, 2016; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). Such qualitative inquiry allows an exploration of the various contexts that frame muscularity and the multiple sociocultural processes that shape muscle-related perceptions and desires.

**Muscular Ideal(s): Voicing Muscular Desires**

Generally, there appears to be an agreeance that many men aspire to achieve a mesomorphic ideal; a body that is epitomised by well-muscled arms, stomach, and pectorals, wide shoulders, and narrow waist (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005). What we learn through listening to others, however, is the potential for different perceptions of muscularity to permeate various social contexts. For example, existing qualitative research suggests a spectrum of acceptable muscular masculine physiques, ranging from a lean, athletic, physique to a higher degree of muscle mass and bulk. Anything outside of these ideals (for some) is deemed non-masculine, such as a "scrawny" physique or a hypermuscular body, which is often viewed as comical, vain, and unnatural (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan & Richards, 2002). Similarly, some men view excessive levels of muscularity as displeasing and reflective of an unacceptable and narcissistic obsession with the body (Grogan & Richards, 2002). Men from other sociocultural fields, such as bodybuilding, however, appear to embrace and value hypermuscularity (Fussell, 1991; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999, 2001, 2002).

The potentially dynamic perspective for ideal muscularity could suggest that muscular ideals and desires may vary on an individual basis and be guided by the social environment (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Monaghan, 1999). The different values associated with an ideal muscular may suggest that weight training individuals engage in different body projects. Body projects reflect the process of working on, and assigning values to, our bodies and the way they can then be used for self-expression (Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 2013). Muscle-specific body projects have been suggested to be driven by two features muscular appearance (e.g., a lean muscular body) and performance (e.g., a strong and productive body; Stewart et al., 2013). Such variations in personal muscular projects cannot be captured by existing conceptualisations and their measures (e.g., DFM and DMS). The potential complexity, multiplicity, and social construction of muscular perceptions and desires informs a need to not only allow individuals a voice, but also consider the social and cultural context that shape their stories, perceptions, and experiences. Rather than assuming a desire for a muscular body is housed in a single story characterised by aesthetics and vanity, research could benefit from exploring the different socially and culturally constructed stories of muscularity. In doing so, we could recognise the potential infusion of social rules and order into one's muscularity, and how different muscular perspectives, meanings, and interpretations are imposed on the body and reinforced into people's identities by the surrounding culture. Some researchers do provide insight into the sociocultural shaping of various meanings and perceptions of muscularity within the bodybuilding subcultures (Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Marazano-Parisoli, 2001; Monaghan, 1999, 2001).

### **Making Sense of Muscle: Cultural Shaping of Muscular Meanings**

Several researchers have endeavoured to provide insight into the muscled culture of male bodybuilding (e.g., Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993, Monaghan, 1999). These ethnographic works have provided insight into both physical and social function of the gym in shaping individuals' muscular attitudes and meanings

(Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016). The gym appears to not merely be a physical container for muscle-building behaviours, but is an arena upheld by various social dimensions, such as different cultural personalities, beliefs, hierarchies, and rituals (Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). Existing literature demonstrates how weight training gyms appear to be part of social, cultural, and symbolic construction process (Andreasson, 2014; Andrews et al., 2005). An investment in the gym appears to span beyond a membership fee (Andrews et al., 2005). Instead individuals also commit their time and bodies to adhering to the formal and informal codes and values of specific muscular subcultures, such as the training rituals, language, physical appearance, and strength (Andrews et al., 2005). The process of learning these muscular codes appears to be socially constructed (Andreasson, 2014; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). A progressive acculturation is apparent, and individuals are exposed to cultural values and norms through the technical and symbolic guidance of “knowledgeable persons” (Andreasson, 2014; Coquet et al., 2016, p. 825; Smith & Stewart, 2012). The learned subcultural knowledge, values, and codes can then be put into practice, which allows a physical experience of the “meaning and substance” of the subcultural activities geared towards building muscle (Andreasson, 2014, p. 12). In an ongoing social learning process, the cultural values are continually reinforced through further interactions, which facilitates a merging of bodily perceptions, the act of training, and the social (bodybuilding) context (Andreasson, 2014).

Similarly, the conceptions and interpretations of muscularity and the ideal physique appear to be shaped by subculturally informed ethnophysiology – culturally contextualised understanding of the body (Manning & Fabrega, 1973; Monaghan, 1999). For example, the learned ways of viewing (e.g., size and leanness) and controlling (e.g., ascetic training, nutritional manipulation, and substance use) one’s physique in the bodybuilding subculture creates a way of evaluating and culturally differentiating oneself (Monaghan, 1999). As such, the involvement in bodybuilding over time appears to transform vague muscular

desires into “definite patterns of action” through subcultural interpretation and artistic deciphering (Bourdieu et al., 1990; Monaghan, 1999, p.270). The subcultural interpretation and shaping of muscular perceptions, values, and practices suggested in the literature reflects a potential drawing on, and embodiment of, common habitus (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1986b; Monaghan, 1999; Shilling, 2013). Engaging with the gym environment alongside the sociocultural interactions within it, appears to help provide the body with symbolic value and offers an opportunity to construct narratives that create a meaningful representation of the self (Andrews et al., 2005; Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993; Shilling, 2013).

Similarly, the gym and the various social features within it appear to both shape and maintain specific muscular subcultures, such as bodybuilding, and the specific physique perceptions normalised within them (Andrews et al., 2005; Monaghan, 1999). The potential interaction between the gym and the muscular subcultures it houses (Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Monaghan, 1999) rationalises a need to continue to explore the intimacies of the weight training environment with a focus on the social construction of different muscular perceptions (e.g., strength and functionality) in other subcultures (e.g., powerlifting). Additionally, exploring the social interactions within the gym helps us delve beyond the potentially superficial reasons for building muscularity (e.g., looking better; McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Pope et al., 2000a) and understand the more meaningful attributions attached to being muscular, such as identity construction (Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993).

### **Constructing Identities: Muscularity as a Symbolic Resource**

Based on existing research, muscularity does appear to be part of a socially informed process of self-construction, transformation, and protection whereby individuals can develop a physique that communicates acceptable social identities, such as masculinity (Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993; Sparkes et al., 2005; Wesley, 2001). Existent research specifically suggests that in modern consumer culture a “toned” and “taut” body is the desired form of physical capital (Frew & McGillivray, 2005). By developing a “good

body” and physical capital one can project self-discipline, which can serve to enhance one’s social worth (Hughes, 2000). The possession of various forms of cultural capital has been associated with constructing various cultural identities and related to “a performing-body”. For example, an individual’s physique can bear symbolic value and facilitate the establishment of multiple identities, such as their training (e.g., Coquet et al., 2016; Phoenix, 2015), gendered (e.g., Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993) and occupational identities (e.g., Edmonds, 2018; Diphooorn, 2015; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013).

Existing research describes the gym as a place where individuals can work on their bodies as projects (Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 2013) and vehicles for self-expression. By displaying desirable characteristics through their bodies some people can achieve coherent and successful identities (Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Stewart et al., 2013). Through building, and gaining recognition for, a muscular physique in the gym, individuals can increase their levels of cultural capital (Brown, 1999; Phoenix, 2015). For example, those who place or win bodybuilding competitions or have notably larger muscle masses and levels of physical strength are assumed to have the highest physical capital, which gives them a more favoured subcultural status (Klein, 1993; Phoenix, 2015). In relation to the current thesis, muscularity could be described as a form of capital that holds symbolic value within the weight training environment and may symbolise success, excellence, and dedication, and enhance one’s subcultural identity (Brown, 1999; Phoenix, 2015).

Throughout the existing qualitative muscularity literature there also appears to be an underlying masculine theme that frames people’s quest for muscularity and permeates the muscled subcultures and associated identities, such as bodybuilding (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Bridges, 2009; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Klein, 1993; Mishkind, et al., 1986; Pope et al., 2000a; Sparkes, Batey, & Brown, 2005). Several studies provide in-depth insights into men’s struggles with masculinity and the role muscularity may play in

their hegemonic masculine identities (e.g., Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999; Pope et al.,

2000a; Sparkes et al., 2005). The role muscularity plays in the construction of men's identities has been interpreted as gender and masculine forms of cultural capital (Bridges, 2009; de Visser et al., 2009). The body appears to be an integral capital resource in the social construction of masculinity, serving as a project to work on and a symbol of one's masculine distinction and competency (Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Gill et al., 2005; Klein, 1993).

Masculinity, traditionally, revolves around the idea of hegemony, which refers to culturally idealised prescriptive masculine norms and the marginalisation of behaviours and attitudes that are deemed feminine or less "manly" (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Traditional and stereotypical masculine characteristics and behaviours include being muscular, playing competitive sport, drinking alcohol, a lack of vanity, not seeking help, risk taking, and heterosexuality (Cheng, 1999; Courtenay, 2000; de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013). Men rarely fully achieve hegemonic masculinity, but instead position themselves in relation to the cultural ideal, either within its confines or distancing themselves from the masculine patriarch (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In attempts to conform to hegemonic ideal, some men will adopt associated behaviours, attitudes, and practices, such as seeking a muscular physique, which has been termed complicit masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 2001).

Historically, muscularity has been attributed to physical labour and male capabilities and emphasised the biological distinction between men and women (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Klein, 1993, 1995; Monaghan, 2002). In this sense, muscularity was, and still is, often seen as an emblematic statement of masculinity, which reflects its role as a form of gender or masculine capital and potentially underpins a compliance to the muscular ideal (Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993, 1995). Societal evolution over time, however, brought industrialisation and a gender division of labour, rendering

physical strength and manual work redundant and reduced the opportunities for men to assert their dominant and superior gender status (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Klein, 1993). These modern societal changes challenged the key foundations for hegemonic masculinity; autonomy, control, power, and dominance (Klein, 1993, 1995; Mishkind et al., 1986; Monaghan, 2002; Pope et al., 2000a). Based on the challenge of growing gender equality and industrialisation, it appears that some men's desire for muscularity reflects a masculine identity crisis (Klein, 1993, 1995; Mills & D'Alfonso, 2007; Mishkind et al., 1986). The crisis represents a threatened masculinity, which generates feelings of insecurity and powerlessness (Gillett & White, 1992; Klein, 1993; Mishkind et al., 1986; Monaghan, 2002).

Research on men's desires for the mesomorphic physique are often grounded in this concept of threatened masculinity and masculine crisis (Klein, 1993; Mishkind et al., 1986; Pope et al., 2000a). Specifically, several researchers have used hegemonic masculinity and the masculine crisis as backdrops for exploring the bodybuilding subculture (Bridges, 2009; Klein, 1993, 1995). Pursuing increased muscle mass is suggested to be one attempt at overcoming the masculine threats and provides an atavistic means of addressing a perceived loss in masculine power and social status and (re)signifies the men's masculinity (Gillett & White, 1992; Klein, 1993, 1995; Mills D'Alfonso, 2007; Monaghan, 2002; Pope et al., 2000a). Specifically, muscularity (to some) appears to symbolise power, control, and dominance, and becomes synonymous with culturally idealised masculine and self-assured bodies (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Brown, 1999; Connell, 2005; Gillet & White, 1992; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Klein, 1993; Mishkind et al., 1986).

Additionally, existing research alludes to the potential protective and compensatory qualities muscularity may have for some men and their masculine identities; counteracting feelings of male insecurity, low self-esteem, and marginalised behaviours, such as homosexual tendencies and alcohol abstinence (de Visser et al., 2009; Edwards, Molnar, & Tod, 2017; Klein, 1993; Sparkes et al., 2005). For example, some men report derogatory,



exclusionary, and abusive relationships with significant others, such as parents and

romantic partners, that appear to instil a sense of inadequacy, emasculation, and create conflicts in their identities (Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005). Such experiences appear to stimulate a desire for increased muscularity, which helps resolve masculine conflicts, provides emotional support, and forms a “protective cocoon” that shields them from, and compensates for, feelings of inadequacy (Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005 p.145). These existing findings suggest muscularity has the capability to overcome masculine threats and role-related struggles, which informed the inclusion of Eriksonian (1959) ideas in the current thesis. The Eriksonian ideas aimed to help frame muscle’s potential value in resolving identity-related conflicts.

Hegemonic masculinity, and its subordination of other less masculine practices is historically critiqued for its inability reflect the potential dynamicity and multiplicity of embodied masculinities (Demetriou, 2001; de Visser et al., 2009; Whitehead, 1999). Despite the origins of hegemonic masculinity and its potentially rigid concept – that there is a patriarchal masculine ideal – there is a recognition that masculinity is not singular or fixed but is a configuration of practices learned within different social settings (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; de Visser et al., 2009). The social construction of masculinity provides men with options – to comply or resist – and suggests masculine identity may be more of a plural concept and consist of multiple (more inclusive) ways of being a man (de Visser et al., 2009). Such suggestions question whether muscularity may have varying symbolic roles in men’s different masculine identities.

Recent literature has embraced the multiplicity of masculinity; giving rise to *inclusive* masculinities (Anderson, 2005). The inclusive masculinity theory helped explain the changing social dynamics in certain cultures, such as sports, where traditional homophobia, emotional strength, and a rejection of traditionally feminine behaviours are diminishing (Anderson 2002; Anderson, 2005; Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Anderson & McGuire, 2010). Inclusive masculinity allows men to construct masculine identities that

incorporate and reframe traditionally feminine or marginalised practices, such as vanity or homosexuality, without jeopardising their overall masculinity (Anderson, 2005; de Visser et al., 2009; Gough, 2013; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Having the opportunity to construct alternative identities to that of hegemonic ideals means men can choose to comply with and resist certain aspects of traditional masculinity (de Visser et al., 2009). The less rigid concept of inclusive masculinity has seen the evolution of “other” masculinities, such as “metrosexuality” (Hall, 2014) and hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). The emergence of other inclusive masculinities proposes that masculinity may be less of a hierarchical and more of a horizontal structure, and muscularity may hold different meanings within these different forms of masculinity. Some masculinities (e.g., metrosexuality) may hold more aesthetic values for muscularity compared to the more traditional strength and power connotations of hegemonic masculinity (de Visser et al., 2009; Klein, 1995).

Despite masculinity being a more plural, flexible, and inclusive concept than historically portrayed, it appears that although some men attempt to detach themselves from traditional masculinity it is hard to remove all ties to hegemonic values. For example, Wetherell and Edley (1999) suggest that even by abandoning macho masculinity and adopting a resistant narrative, men still ironically demonstrate hegemonic values, such as independence and autonomy. Similarly, despite some men choosing to perceive and position themselves outside of hegemonic masculinity, it is apparent that traditional values still serve to shape their masculine identities. For example, men may actively seek other more masculine domains to counteract or compensate for “gaps” in their masculinity (de Visser et al., 2009).

Given the existence of multiple masculinities, the understanding of muscularity within a hegemonic masculinity may be too restricting. Although some individuals may not necessarily conform to traditional masculinity and the associated muscular images and connotations, their muscularity may still hold symbolic value in their masculine identities.

Understanding muscularity and the underpinning themes and contexts that shape

individuals' perceptions helps realise that muscular desires can span beyond a superficial vanity or want for big muscles. What we learn is that muscular desires and contextual meanings may vary on an individual basis and be shaped by different identity-related connotations and contexts.

The existing qualitative literature appears to have a predominant focus on specific cultural contexts and identities (e.g., bodybuilding and masculinity). Although exploring these cultures and their identity-related meanings assigned to muscularity is valuable, it informs the question about muscularity's role in other training subcultures (e.g., powerlifting) and identities (e.g., occupational). For example, not everyone is drawn to or invests in bodybuilding specifically (Coquet et al., 2016). Similarly, not all individuals' muscular desires will be grounded in hegemonic masculinity or exclusively attributed to a masculine identity. Some recent research has discussed muscularity's beneficial role as cultural capital in a variety of occupational identities. For example, muscularity appears to represent a form of physical capital for individuals working in muscle-focused health and fitness environments, such as personal trainers (PTs) and strength and conditioning coaches (Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013). Building and possessing higher levels of muscularity appears to signify a PTs and strength and conditioning coach's credibility and capabilities and becomes their "business card" (Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013). Specifically, a muscular body appears to influence a potential client's perceptions of the trainer's skill set, knowledge, and commitment (Edmonds, 2018). Like existing research into bodybuilding and masculine identities, the more physical capital (e.g., muscularity) health and fitness professionals possess appears to enhance their desired identities and be emblematic of success and competence.

Other, non-health and fitness-related, occupational identities appear to be optimised through the body and possession of a muscular physique as cultural capital. Jobs that require an image of aggression, violence, and intimidation appear to be benefitted by

muscularity (Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; McVeigh & Evans-Brown, 2009; Diphooorn, 2015). The existing research into muscularity's role and impact on other areas of life, outside the gym and traditional masculinity, is limited. The current thesis sought to build on the existing research and more broadly explore different subcultures and other identity-related stories and meanings that may underpin people's desire to build muscle.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Existing positivist assumptions in the muscle literature focus on conceptualising and generalising muscular desires and emphasises visual muscularity and appearance. The predominant quantitative approaches and the theoretical focus on muscular appearance as a motivation to build muscle does not allow for individual variance. Some studies suggest bodily fitness, health, and function, in relation to muscularity (Davis et al., 2005; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). These suggestions, however, are overshadowed by the predominance of a generalised appearance assumption. The possibility for a variation in the way individuals interpret muscularity and what value muscularity holds to them may explain the potential inconsistencies in the existing quantitative findings and call for more in-depth qualitative approaches (Edwards et al., 2014; Tod, Edwards, & Cranswick, 2016).

With a limited subjective insight into muscular concerns and desires it is difficult to contextualise people's muscular desires and comprehend how these may fit within their personal experiences and identities. Qualitative research is better positioned to offer participants a voice and capture individuals' personal stories, meanings, and contexts associated with muscularity desires. Existing qualitative research does attempt to capture the rich stories and sociocultural experiences that frame and shape men's muscularity experiences (e.g., Edwards et al., 2017; Klein, 1993; Sparkes et al., 2005). Despite some personal voices being present within the literature, there still appears to be a lack of breadth to the perspectives and stories shared. For example, most studies use traditional masculinity to frame men's muscularity and focus on specific subcultures and groups of people (e.g., bodybuilders; Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999).

Given modern shifts in masculinity, such as the presence of multiple masculinities (e.g., metrosexuality and inclusive masculinities; Anderson, 2005; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Hall, 2014) and the potential for muscularity to influence other identities (e.g., specific occupations; Diphooorn, 2015; Edmonds, 2018) we may need adopt a more open and broader approach when exploring stories of muscular desire. The narrow focus and lack of insight into the wider context for muscular desires inspired the current thesis to explore the potential for muscularity to permeate other identities and aspects of individuals' lives.

The current thesis aimed to fill the existing gaps by exploring the personal stories of a range of individuals invested in muscular development, which could help demonstrate muscularity's versatile role in the construction and performance of various identities. Adopting rich, qualitative, approaches and drawing on interpretivist perspectives and assumptions allowed me to embrace the potential diversity of muscular meanings and access the multiple, socially constructed, stories that are limited in the existing literature. The interpretivist assumptions and acknowledgement of social construction helped shed light on why muscularity appeals to a range of individuals, the different meanings and values they attach to it, and the impact on their lives and identities.

The lack of personal stories about muscular concerns and desires in the existing literature may be explained by the lack of emotional integrity and the masculine taboos that men do not show weakness or emotion, and are expected to abide by typically masculine behaviours (Connell, 2005; Pope et al., 2000a). The prolonged interactions with the participants in the current thesis, alongside the broader focus for muscularity, hoped to build rapport and make individuals more comfortable discussing their muscular experiences and desires. By sharing more of the varied personal stories about muscular desire may resonate with others and encourage them to share their own experiences and stories, which could benefit the understanding of body image concerns in a range of men.

The current qualitative studies (chapters 4, 5, and 6), specifically, used autoethnographic, life- history, and ethnographical methodologies to capture the current

participants' life histories and narratives. Additionally, the current methods helped gain an understanding of the culture that often houses those with muscularity concerns – the gym. These approaches expand on existing literature offering additional participant voices and demonstrating the multiple social experiences and meanings associated with muscular desires. The final chapter collectively discusses the findings of each of the studies and their contribution to the existing literature as well as offering some direction for future research.

### Chapter Three: Methodology

The following chapter discusses the philosophical underpinnings and the qualitative methodologies and methods used to achieve the aims of the current thesis. Additionally, I describe the general credibility criteria that guided the study designs. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss the individual methods of each study in more detail, describing the participant recruitment, data collection, and data analyses.

#### Research Philosophy

Research philosophy refers to a “system of beliefs and assumptions” that researchers have regarding knowledge development (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2015, p.124). These philosophical assumptions include researcher values, the nature of reality, and beliefs about human knowledge (Saunders et al., 2015). These set of beliefs are referred to as the axiological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions respectively, which all guide a researcher’s understanding of their research question, the methods they use, and their interpretation of their findings (Crotty, 1998). Two common overarching philosophical perspectives are positivism and interpretivism, which commonly underpin quantitative and qualitative methodologies respectively.

**Positivism.** Positivism is a philosophical stance that interprets knowledge as being factual, unambiguous, and uninfluenced by human behaviour. Through acquiring such knowledge, positivist generally aim to achieve generalisation and the discovery of causal relationships (Markula & Silk, 2011; Saunders et al., 2015; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). The ontological assumptions of positivism are grounded in a single, external, and independent reality (Markula & Silk, 2011; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). Such a realist ontological perspective assumes that reality is not mediated by people and does not differ between individuals. A positivist epistemology is based on objectivity and assumes knowledge is based on observable and measurable facts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lee, 1991; Markula & Silk, 2011; Saunders et al, 2015; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). The objective approach to

knowledge development is etic in nature, maintains a distance between the researcher and the researched, and is free of values (Balarabe Kura, 2012).

**Interpretivism.** Interpretivism, unlike positivism, avoids generalisation, embraces participants' subjective experiences, and interprets the meanings assigned to given phenomenon (Balarabe Kura, 2012; Markula & Silk, 2011; Saunders et al., 2015; Thorpe & Olive, 2016). The interpretivist philosophy draws on ontological relativism, which assumes "multiple realities" exist and are socially constructed, malleable, and dependent on an individual's psychosocial and contextual experiences (Markula & Silk, 2011; Papathomas, 2016; Smith & Caddick, 2012; Thorpe & olive, 2016). The epistemological assumptions of interpretivism are based on social constructionism, which embraces knowledge as a product of relational interactions and not simply "out there" (Papathomas, 2016; Smith & Caddick, 2012, p. 61). The interactional assumption of knowledge development acknowledges the researcher's values and condones their involvement in the research process.

Both philosophical perspectives have their place within research but the aims of the current thesis - to explore the different meanings associated with people's muscular desires – were guided by an interpretivist standpoint, which guided the methodological approaches within the current studies.

**The current thesis philosophy.** The current thesis sought to understand the personal meanings of muscularity, the social experiences that shaped these meanings, and the impact the muscular meanings had on individuals' identities. A positivist perspective seeking generalization and assuming single realities and objective truths was not suited to the aims of the current thesis. The majority of existing muscularity research, such as DFM and MD literature, is often deductive and positivist in nature, treating knowledge and reality as external to the researcher. This positivist approach is largely quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional, which does not allow room for the participant's voice and narrows the scope for understanding the complexity of muscularity perceptions and



desires. The focus on conceptualising, generalising, and pathologising muscularity

perceptions, (e.g., DFM and MD) means in-depth studies of the subjective experiences and meanings of muscularity are relatively limited. This lack of insight into personal experiences of muscularity shaped the current thesis aims philosophical underpinnings.

Framing the current studies through an interpretivist philosophical lens, and drawing on ontological relativism, epistemological social constructionism, and an integrated researcher-researched approach meant I could acknowledge the multiple realities and co-constructed meanings of muscularity in the weight training subcultures. Accepting my investment and interest in the subject of muscularity meant I could adopt a synonymous role in the research process. Similarly, not divorcing my values from the research process facilitated my relationships with the current participants and embraced the social construction of multiple and contextual meanings and experiences. For example, as the researcher I interacted with the participants, mutually shared experiences, and through interviews and observations co-constructed representations of the various realities and meanings expressed in the weight training subcultures I explored.

The interpretive philosophical assumptions informed the current use of qualitative methodologies and specific research methods towards achieving the overall purpose of exploring the personal stories of muscularity in weight training individuals.

### **Qualitative Inquiry**

The current thesis aimed to share the diverse and personal meanings of muscularity required an approach (e.g., qualitative inquiry) that embraced the complexity, multiplicity, and contextualization assumed within interpretivism (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). The objectivity, etic perspectives, and the focus on generalisation within positivism and quantitative methodologies was not suited to the current thesis.. Instead the naturalistic, interpretative, emic approaches that underpin qualitative inquiry were better suited to the current aims and research philosophy(Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2013). Specifically, using qualitative methodologies helped

comprehend the ‘what’, ‘why’, and ‘how’ of given experiences (e.g., muscular desires)

rather than a focus on ‘how much or how many’ as is the aim of quantitative research (Ormston et al., 2013). The qualitative approach in the current thesis allowed me to make sense of muscular desires within its natural setting (e.g., the gym and weight training culture) and understand the meanings people assign to them (e.g., identity). For example, I could explore *what* muscularity meant to the participants, *why* muscularity was so meaningful to them, and *how* muscularity’s meaning developed and impacted their lives and identities. Drawing on qualitative methodologies (e.g., ethnography, narrative inquiry, and life-history) and methods (e.g., interviews and participant observations) allowed me to capture the participants’ personal experiences and provided an opportunity to co-construct meaningful representations of the stories they told (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Given the subjective backdrop and the opportunities for participants to voice their own experiences within qualitative research, it was an appropriate methodology for exploring people’s personal meanings of muscularity and the role it plays within their identities.

## Methods

Within the chosen qualitative methodologies, the current studies used various qualitative methods, such as interviews and participant observations, to capture the participants’ experiences. The observational and interview methods used in the current thesis generated naturalistic data in the form of field notes and interview transcripts, which helped interpret the participants’ view of their social world. The participant observations offered an insight into the narratives that were constructed to frame the co-existing realities present within the weight training subcultures.

Chapter 4 used an autoethnographic methodology and shared my own sociocultural interactions and muscular perceptions and desires. The self-reflection I used drew on both outward (e.g., focusing on sociocultural aspects of personal experiences) and inward perspectives (e.g., revealing the sociocultural impacts on the self; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The autoethnography provides an opportunity for naturalistic generalisation and resonance

within the readers. Additionally, describing my experiences and beliefs could help readers comprehend the interpretations made in the subsequent studies. The findings of the autoethnography also helped inform the subsequent studies by making me aware of potential influences, interpretations, and meanings associated with muscularity that may be present in others' stories.

Chapter 5 explored others using a life-history methodology and semi-structured interviews, which sought to expand upon the previous autoethnographical study by sharing others' muscularity stories, experiences, and influences. Exploring others' stories helped embrace the similarities and differences individuals may express regarding their muscularity concerns and desires and moves away from a generalised vantage point for muscular meanings. The procedure consisted of semi-structured questioning, whereby I had an idea of topics to potentially cover, but there was flexibility and opportunity for the participants to have a voice and direct the interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The semi-structured interviews applied a life-history methodological approach that consisted of broad, "grand tour", questioning that encouraged the sharing of life accounts (Wolcott, 1994). The life-history approach allowed the participants to cover various aspects of their lives (e.g., family or work), and elicited personal and temporal experiences, meanings, and influences (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Chapter 6 built on the previous two studies by exploring the weight training culture, which was frequently discussed by myself and others. Engaging in the weight training environment (as a participant-observer) meant I could witness the social construction of muscular meanings and capture the different personal stories that framed the individuals' attachment to muscularity within this diverse culture. To observe and explore the weight training culture I used ethnography. Ethnographies assume that individuals who interact with each other over periods of time will develop a culture, within which they construct specific behaviours and beliefs (Patton, 2015). I used traditional ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews, in two separate gyms,

which allowed me to interact with, and share the experiences of, those who invested in weight training and muscle-building activities. Using these methods helped comprehend the different muscle-related behaviours, beliefs, and meanings constructed within the weight training environment.

Collectively the interpretivist philosophy and qualitative methodologies helped provide an understanding of the identity-related meanings associated with muscularity in individuals invested in the weight training culture and subcultures. Exploring these individuals and their culture addressed the aims of the PhD thesis by sharing the personal stories of muscularity, the meanings muscle held within these stories, and the impact muscularity had on their daily lives and identities. The findings inform the literature of the complexity and individuality of muscular perceptions and desires, which may guide future research to further adopt a less generalised perspective for muscularity. Embracing the diversity of muscular meanings could help inform support strategies of the need to understand individuals' personal experiences and the context in which they frame their muscular concerns or desires.

### **Participant Recruitment**

The existing muscularity literature tends to explore student populations and bodybuilders and often fails to account for muscularity concerns, desires, and experiences in a range of demographic groups and training subcultures. Given the relationship between weight training and muscularity concerns (Edwards et al., 2014; Tod & Edwards, 2015; Robert et al., 2009; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Tiggemann, 2005), it was suitable to explore people committed to weight training and its culture because they were believed to have exposure to, and an investment in, muscularity. The weight lifting culture, however, houses a diverse range of demographic, training, and social backgrounds, which could potential offer multiple stories and experiences beyond the bodybuilding population. The focus on weight training individuals required a purposive sampling method with specific inclusion criteria to ensure the individuals demonstrated a meaningful commitment to

muscular development and the associated cultures that the thesis aimed to capture.

Chapters 5 and 6 describe the specific inclusion criteria for the chosen individuals in the associated studies. The purpose of exploring the personal identity-related meanings associated with muscular desires informed the use of qualitative research methods and approaches to analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Throughout the current thesis I use both thematic and narrative analyses to describe the content and structure of the muscular narratives expressed by myself and others. Using thematic analytical methods allowed me to get a feel for what was being said and observed. Using the emergent themes that represented what was being said, I could also conduct an analysis of how individuals structured and framed their experiences and desires using narrative approaches. Combining these methods meant I could create a rich representation of what muscularity meant to individuals and how it became storied into, and impacted, their lives and identities.

**Thematic analysis.** Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns and emergent themes within a data set and allows an interpretation and description of them in the context of a given phenomenon or experience (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2010; Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). In the current study, the themes that emerged were related to individuals' muscular concerns and desires, as well as their experiences and interactions within the weight training culture. Two ways of conducting a thematic analysis include inductive and deductive theme generations. Inductive thematic analysis is data-driven, whereby codes and themes emerge from the participant responses, which may not be directly linked to research questions or the researcher's theoretical interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Patton, 2015). Conducting inductive methods means that codes and themes are not guided by existing frameworks or preconceived analytical ideas (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In contrast, deductive thematic analysis is analyst-driven and identifies codes and themes based on previous coding and theoretical frameworks associated with a given topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These approaches need not be use in isolation, and some researchers combine both inductive and deductive analytical methods (see Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The current thesis draws on this “hybrid” approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to analyse the naturalistic data from participants, but also offer some theoretically-driven themes associated with the participants stories. This approach demonstrated a two-way interaction between the data and the literature, which was beneficial to the interpretation and presentation of the participants’ stories. For example, the themes that emerged from participant responses guided my theoretical reading, which would then stimulate the identification of new and additional codes.

The types or “level” of themes generated also needs to be considered when conducting a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2010). Two primary levels of theme identification are commonly used; semantic and latent (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2010). A semantic approach is very explicit and identifies theme based on the surface meanings of what participants say and the codes will often directly link to precise words and statements made (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In contrast, latent codes go beyond what explicitly said or written and offers an interpretation of the underlying meanings of people’s responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2010). Latent coding offers some insight into the ideas, concepts, and theoretical themes that may shape and inform what the participants are saying (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the current thesis both levels of coding were used with some reflecting the superficial content of the participants’ responses, and the latent codes representing the underlying meanings behind their stories. The focus on underlying themes and theoretical interpretation of content reflected the current aim of exploring the meanings of muscularity within individuals’ identities. Given this research focus, the current thesis predominantly identified latent codes and read beyond the surface content of the interview transcripts and

field notes. The thematic analyses conducted in the current thesis supplemented and guided further narrative analyses to aid the interpretation of meanings.

**Narrative analysis.** Narratives are stories that can become the object of inquiry rather than simply an account or report of events, and they provide diachronic data sets creating a temporal representation of experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Constructing narratives, unlike the existing quantitative methods that are common in the muscularity research, allowed the current participants to express their own views of reality and make sense of their muscular desires and the weight training world they engaged in (Papathomas, 2016). Individuals co-construct narratives through interactions with others and, specifically, those who listen to the stories told, such as me as the researcher (Papathomas, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). As such, narrative constructions impact and satisfy both the narrators and the listeners and can guide perceptions and behaviours (Papathomas, 2016).

Through narrative analysis I could seek a subjective “truth” rather than focusing on objectivity and “absolute realities”. The subjectivity of narrative analysis allowed me to explore and comprehend what muscularity meant to the current participants who chose to invest in its development. I could also begin to understand how these meanings were framed and contextualised within the specific sociocultural environments, and how the narratives influenced the participants’ lives, feelings, and behaviours (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Narratives are characterised by having distinct genre, plots, and characters (Papathomas, 2016). Narrative genre refers to its overarching thematic structure and generality (Papathomas, 2016). There are many proposed narrative genres, such as those by Gergen and Gergen (1986); progressive (e.g., bad to good), regressive (good to bad), and stable (unchanged). Frank (1995) proposed context-specific illness narratives (restitution, chaos, and quest) that interpreted people’s stories of coping with life-changing injuries. Generally, the current studies revealed a performance genre (Douglas & Carless, 2009) that framed the individuals’ narratives and encased their muscular meanings within

the projection of identities (see chapters 4, 5 and 6). The current studies, however, demonstrated different realignment narrative plotlines (e.g., redemption, reliance, and relapse; see chapter 5) and thematic backdrops (e.g., internalist, compensator, and promoter; see chapter 6) that served to construct and maintain an overall alignment with their master performance narratives.

Narrative plots provided explanations for, and revealed the consequences of, the stories and experiences the participants told, which constructs a journey; “experience A leads to experience B, culminating in experience C” (Papathomas, 2016 p.40). Providing order to experiences through a plot allowed the participants and myself (as the listener) to make explanatory sense of them and comprehend their meanings (Papathomas, 2016; Ricoeur, 1984). For example, chapter 5 presents the journey the participants took to mould their enactment of a masculine identity, but also shares different realignment narrative plots aimed at overcoming threats to an overarching masculine performance narrative, such as injury (e.g., a redemption plot). Several plots and narrative themes emerged throughout the thesis and will be discussed in the associated chapters. The narrative plots, organisation, and themes revealed the influential and motivational factors, consequences, and responses that guided the participants’ perceptions and behaviours.

Alongside a plot, various characters are often present within individuals’ narratives and they do not only act independently, but they also interact with each other. The use of characters within the current participants’ narratives reflected the interpretive philosophy of the current thesis and the proposed interactional nature of the development of muscular perceptions and desires. Additionally, narratives do not only contain characters, such as the participants and significant others, but they can also reveal one’s character and more specifically their identities and sense of self (Papathomas, 2016). Narratives are a useful tool to explore and understand individuals’ identity construction. Specifically, exploring the narratives people construct can provide an opportunity for us to comprehend how and why individuals project themselves in a certain way.



**Narrative identity.** Narratives can facilitate the ability to make sense and meaning of personal experiences (Reese, Jack, & White, 2010). Meaning making allows individuals to read beyond the plot and content of their experiences and begin to articulate what their stories project about who they are (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Individuals construct, internalise, and revise these evolving and integrative stories of their lives. Through this process people can reconstruct past experiences and envision a future that provides meaning and purpose to their lives (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). The construction of such stories has been termed narrative identity (Singer, 2004), through which individuals can convey to both themselves and others who they are, how they became who they are, and what their future may hold (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Analysing the way individuals structure their experiences can provide an insight into the type of person and identity they may be seeking to create, uphold, and project (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Narrative identities develop over time as stories are told to, and with, others. The temporal development of people's stories continuously updates our sense of self and identities making narrative identity "processual and relational" (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Somers, 1994, p. 621). As such, narratives and identities are products of social interaction and subject to various sociocultural influences that edit, reinterpret, and restructure the telling of stories (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). Given the interactional construction of narrative identity, the sharing of stories can provide valuable insights into the social shaping of meanings and morals. Gaining these insights is beneficial to our understanding of how muscular meanings may be socially constructed and shape the self and one's identities (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Existing narrative research has been used to explore eating disorders and alluded to the potential environmental and identity ties, conflicts, and threats that may be interweaved into the stories used to frame eating disorder influences and experiences (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006, 2010, 2014). For example, Papathomas and Lavalley

(2006, 2014) demonstrate athletic performance and achievement narratives used by

individuals to contextualise and frame their eating disorder experiences (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006, 2014). Specifically, when sporting and academic success do not fulfil an individuals' culturally informed performance narrative, they turned to self-starvation and disordered eating as a means of achieving. Similar narrative research would be useful in exploring muscularity self-perceptions and desires, to attempt to comprehend the reasons why some individuals invest so much into building muscularity.

Existing work, such as that of Papathomas and colleagues, inspired the current thesis to adopt a similar person-focused, less generalised, approach to exploring muscularity self-perceptions, concerns, and desires. Specifically, the current thesis aimed to collect stories from people invested in the weight training culture and explore the potential identity-related narratives that may frame and shape their muscular desires. Additionally, by adopting a narrative and identity approach I could embrace the individuality of muscular experiences, concerns, and desires. For example, chapter 6 shares a series of versatile narrative themes that drew on muscularity in different ways to construct a variety of identities. These narratives provided an understanding of the different identity-related meanings assigned to muscularity and the subsequent desire for it.

**Narrative approaches.** There are several approaches within narrative analysis, and to achieve the aims of the thesis I drew on two of these (*story analyst* and *storyteller*). The position of *story analyst* generates theoretical explanations and interpretations of the features within the narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Through the story analyst approach, I connected theory to data whilst allowing space for the participant's voice to be heard (Sparkes, 2002). The analysis of each story and the theoretical concepts attributed to these stories created an overall picture of the each participant's perceptions and sociocultural experiences of their world (Sparkes, 2002; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

The specific story analytic approaches used within the current studies were *thematic* and *structural* narrative analyses, which allowed an examination of *what* people said, *how* they said it, and the effects of telling it in that way (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Smith, 2016). Often researchers will elect an analytical focus such as the content (e.g., “what’s” of the stories) or the structure (e.g., the “how’s of the stories). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) propose a process of analytical bracketing, which provides the flexibility to shift the focus between the descriptive content of the stories (what) and the way the stories are contextually structured (how). Using analytical bracketing meant I could appreciate the independent value in each analytical focus, whilst capturing the reflexive interplay between the content and structure of the narratives (Smith, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2002).

The structural and thematic analyses and analytical bracketing in the current studies specifically involved examining the participants’ stories for key features that framed the individuals’ experiences, which gave insight into the “what’s” of the stories they told. Additionally, a structural analysis allowed me to also examine how the key narrative features were organised, how the participants imposed order on their experiences, and the effects these stories had (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Smith, 2016). These features aided the identification and interpretation of the narrative golden threads (Raggatt, 2006) that underpinned the participants’ stories and guided their actions, thoughts, and emotions (Papathomas, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2005; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). For example, in chapter 5 the participants all structured their narratives around the development and maintenance of a masculine identity, which subsequently shaped their life choices, identity, and response to associated threats and conflicts (e.g., injury). The story analyst standpoint draws on theoretical constructs to help explain the narratives, their structure, and my interpretations of them. Throughout the current thesis the theoretical idea of identity (e.g., masculinity) and muscularity as a form of cultural, identity, capital (Bourdieu, 1986a,

1986b; Côté, 2016; de Visser et al., 2009) aided the interpretation of the all the participants' narratives.

In the autoethnography (chapter 4) I drew on elements of the storyteller approach. The creation and telling of the stories became part of the analysis and demonstrated theoretical ideas first hand. Whereas story analysts *tell* the story and theory, storytellers *show* the story and theory (Ellis, 2004; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). For example, by capturing a rugby changing room experience where my lack of muscularity created a sense of rejection I could demonstrate and suggest the value of muscle as a form of cultural capital. By "showing" the story I could place readers in the moment and create resonating images in their imagination, rather than simply cataloguing and summarising events and emotions (Smith & Spakes, 2009).

As part of the storyteller standpoint I used *creative analytic practices* (CAP). Instead of producing traditional scientific knowledge CAP creates "messy vulnerable texts that make you cry", which aim to "change the world by writing from the heart" (Denzin, 2006, p. 421-422). Specifically, CAP does not aim to generalise, but instead represent the personal and social meanings associated with experiences. These meanings are rooted in the social and cultural context of the researched rather than being researcher-driven with theory-imposed explanations (Parry & Johnson, 2007). CAP achieves its aims by using artistic, emotional, and evocative writing styles and techniques. In chapter 4 I constructed fragments that captured my experiences of muscularity within various social worlds. The fragment construction formed analyses in themselves and demonstrated theoretical concepts through vivid depictions of my experiences (Richardson, 2000).

With the aim of constructing creative and evocative narratives throughout the current thesis I sought advice and help from researchers with backgrounds in creative non-fiction as well as other English language experts. These individuals read my work, offered useful resources, and helped develop my creative writing skills. Specifically, we engaged

in critical discussion about my initial drafts and identified areas for improvement, which guided further reading (e.g., Richardson, 1997, 2000 and Parry & Johnson, 2007).

Despite the two standpoints within narrative analysis they are not entirely isolated, and I drew on both approaches. By combining these approaches, the current studies aimed to fully capture and demonstrate the content, structure, and communication of the narratives, whilst offering some theoretical interpretation and contextualisation for the individuals' stories.

Using narrative analysis within the current thesis attempted to bridge a gap in the muscularity research. Through a narrative approach I could delve into the personal meanings of muscularity, the potentially different values attached to it, and the way muscularity becomes engrained into an individual's storied lives and identities. The current thesis attempts to embrace and comprehend the complexity of muscular perceptions and the variability of influences and experiences that may guide one's concerns and desires.

### **Evaluating Qualitative Research**

Traditionally quantitative research is concerned about validity, which centres around the "truthfulness" of interpretations and the confidence researchers can have in any statements or conclusions made (Vaughn & Daniel, 2012). The subjectivity of qualitative research, however, requires a flexible study design and set of evaluative criteria (Smith & Caddick, 2012). The aims of the current methodologies – to achieve rich narratives that offer a window into the participants' experiences and muscular desires - directed the criteria that informed the research design in chapters 4, 5, and 6. The following were the commonly selected criteria throughout the current thesis, informed by Smith and Caddick (2012). Some of the studies used additional criteria in-line with the specific research designs, which will be discussed in the associated chapters along with the measures taken to meet each specific criterion.

**Substantive contribution.** I strived to ensure that the current series of studies provided a significant contribution to the muscularity literature. This criterion questions

what the current studies add to, or how they expand, the existing literature. Additionally, substantive contribution questioned whether the research challenged my perspectives, their place in social science, and how they informed the construction of the work (Richardson, 2000). As discussed previously, the current PhD studies followed an interpretivist perspective using naturalistic methods of data collection; interviews, observations, and field notes. The current in-depth, narrative, approach is a novel way to explore muscularity concerns, which offers a contribution to the understanding of the multiple meanings of muscularity within the weight training culture. The current approach, unlike more recent cross-sectional methods within the literature, embraces the interactional, situational, and sociocultural construction of human perceptions and behaviour regarding muscularity. Embracing individual experiences and people's contextual interactions builds on existing muscle research by describing some of the deeper-rooted meanings of a muscular physique (e.g., identity) and suggesting the multiplicity of the narratives that frame individuals' relationships with muscularity. The individuals study chapters discuss the specific contributions.

**Impact.** My aim to conduct a series of studies that had a substantial influence on both the readers and research is associated with impact as an evaluative criterion. Impact questions whether the studies affect the readers emotionally and intellectually and whether the research has the capability to stimulate new lines of research (Richardson, 2000, p. 937; Smith & Caddick, 2012). Specifically, impact ensured that the current studies were capable of provoking thoughts, emotions, and ideas that may inform and influence both the readers and future research. The personal meanings and lived experiences captured in the current narratives could encourage readers to empathise with the stories and reflect on their own experiences of muscularity. For example, the autoethnography in chapter 4 drew on sensitive experiences with the aim of stimulating an emotional reaction within the reader and provoke self-reflection and generation of new ideas. The use of ethnographical traditions is limited within the muscularity literature, but the potential emotional and

intellectual impact the current ethnography may have on other researchers could inspire further narrative and ethnographic approaches.

**Resonance.** Resonance specifically assesses the ability of the work to evoke the transfer of the findings into readers lives (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Tracy, 2010). This criterion is similar to naturalistic generalisation, which consists of individuals' tacit transference of knowledge from the natural depictions of others into their own personal contexts (Melrose, 2009; Stake, 1978). The current studies attempted to encourage resonance by presenting sensitive and personal narratives that explicitly expressed the emotions, beliefs, and perceptions of both myself and the participants. The presentation of these narratives and content has the power to evoke empathetic and sympathetic emotions within readers, which may stimulate similar memories, feelings, or emotions. The studies also offered interpretations and reasons for specific experiences, which may encourage readers to transfer the findings to their social environment and experiences and inform their understanding of similar feelings or experiences. To aid the resonance of the current studies, the help of the two English language experts again proved beneficial in constructing evocative and relatable narratives.

**Width.** Width ensured I collected adequate, high quality, and comprehensive evidence that provided the opportunity for valuable interpretations (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashich, & Zilber, 1998). Ensuring I had quality data to achieve the aims of the current thesis guided the collection of subjective and naturalistic data. Generally, throughout each of the current PhD studies several interviews and observations were made until theoretical saturation was determined and no new data emerged or altered my interpretations. This process ensured I collected enough data to provide rich, meaningful, and substantial narratives, as well as develop sufficient support for the theoretical interpretations. Specific narratives and a range of quotations supported and demonstrated the links made between the theory, my interpretations, and the data. For example, chapter 6 presents field notes detailing the first-hand observations, interactions, and conversations with the participants,

which both guided and contextualised my theoretical interpretations. Additionally, presenting the raw data gave readers insight into the unfolding events and interactions, which left room for readers to make their own judgements and interpretations.

**Coherence.** Coherence concerns the ability of the studies to combine the interpretations, data, and theory to create a “complete and meaningful picture” (Lieblich et al., 1998; Smith & Caddick, 2012, p 70). The current PhD studies used a two-way interaction between the narratives and existing theory, intertwining the two to create a plot and golden thread that knitted the narratives together creating an overall, flowing, picture for readers. The help I received from two individuals with English language and linguistics backgrounds proved valuable when achieving flow and creativity, as well as when shifting writing styles between writing in first person for the autoethnography and creating descriptive accounts of others’ experiences and their environments.

Alongside the content of the individual studies, the structure of the thesis attempts to create a coherent message by constructing a story of the way individuals’ muscular desires are grounded in their desire to construct socially informed identities. Presenting the stories of myself, others, and the surrounding weight training culture helps suggest the overarching similarities (e.g., identity-related meanings), but also the multiplicity and individuality associated with people’s muscular experiences and their effect on individuals’ perceptions, behaviours, and desires.

**Credibility.** Given the characteristic subjectivity of the current qualitative studies, the credibility criterion questioned whether I had spent enough time with the participants to gain sufficient insight into their experiences. It also concerns the assurance that any interpretations I made were fair and provide appropriate representations of the participants’ experiences (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Tracy, 2010). The current studies sought participant reflection to ensure I made credible representations and interpretations, but also to provide an opportunity for additional elaboration and deeper analyses to occur (Tracy, 2010).



Seeking participant approval does not make my interpretations “real” or “true”, instead it suggests they were viable, co-constructed, inferences amongst many potential others.

The autoethnography study sought input from those involved in the narratives to ensure detailed and vibrant representations of their experiences. Regarding the life-history study and ethnography, my role as a sports therapist and participant-observer respectively meant I gradually built a good rapport and trusting relationship with the participants. Spending time with the participants and interacting over a prolonged period, such as the ethnography (see chapter 6), resulted in the participants being more comfortable when discussing their experiences. My prolonged exposure and presence also created regular access for participant reflection and follow up interactions and interviews. Given my rapport and the trust the participants (eventually) invested in me, I gained regular valuable feedback on my data and interpretations. Receiving such reviews meant that I could be confident that my interpretations were credible and plausible.

**Transparency.** The assumption that reality is socially constructed that underpinned the current thesis guided the choice for transparency as an evaluative criterion. Making the research process, data, researcher-participant relationships, and interpretations clear to others (non-participants) provided an opportunity for critical feedback and reflection. This process provided opportunities to challenge and question my role and interpretations, as well as offer alternative viewpoints (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Tracy, 2010). Throughout each study the interpretations and data were shared as part of a peer triangulation process and reviewed by other researchers from various scientific backgrounds. These individuals offered alternative viewpoints, critiqued the data and interpretations, and prompted adjustments to ensure the aims were clearly expressed, the procedures were suitable, and the literature-based interpretations were appropriate. The alternative views and questioning of interpretations were constructive and prompted a reflection and strengthening of the arguments and explanations presented. Alongside other researchers’ viewpoints, seeking

participant reflection (previously discussed) also demonstrated the transparency given to the data and interpretations.

**Ethical procedures.** Although not one of the criteria listed by Smith and Caddick (2012), given the personal and longitudinal interactions with participants present in the life-history study and ethnography respectively, I had to consider the potential ethical issues that may have arose. Prior to conducting each of the studies, ethical clearance was gained from Liverpool John Moores University research ethics committee. This process highlighted areas for potential concern and consideration and encouraged me to evaluate the methodological procedures used within the current studies, such as participant confidentiality and my role as a researcher. A specific example from the ethnography (see chapter 6) was my need to consider the potential risks and issues associated with both myself and others (e.g., observing or discussing illegal or harmful behaviours), whilst also trying to develop a “natural” relationship that would provide credible data.

To overcome some of the common issues, I ensured that the storage of personal details and responses was secure and that any reference to specific individuals used a pseudonym. Regarding the potential exposure of sensitive topics or behaviours, each study information document signposted appropriate and qualified individuals or institutions (e.g., qualified psychologists and harm reduction units) that could support anyone who experienced any discomfort or displayed any concerning behaviour. My research role was always made transparent, and the status of gatekeepers within the ethnography aided the dissemination of my presence and goals. After making appropriate adjustments ethical clearance was obtained.

The chosen evaluative criteria then guided the design and implementation of the following studies. All three of the following studies drew on qualitative methods and required a thorough consideration of the various evaluative criteria. Following the appropriate criteria meant that the current purpose and aims could be met across all the

studies, whilst ensuring that their findings were sound in the eyes of the qualitative research world.

Chapter 4 presents the first step in my qualitative journey and explores my muscular meanings, concerns, and desires through autoethnography. The study allowed me to reflect on, and share, my personal experiences, interest in muscularity, and the meaningful desires for a more muscular physique. By understanding my experiences, I could inform the subsequent studies and comprehend others' experiences by sensitising myself to the potential features and influences that may emerge.

**Chapter Four: Muscles and Me: An Autoethnography of Muscular Masculinity**

The following chapter presents a study that explored my muscularity self-perceptions, concerns, and desires through autoethnography. Exploring these personal experiences allowed access to the rich fragments of lived encounters and conflicts, which can often be restricted with other qualitative methods. Interviewing men about their feelings, emotions, and sensitive subjects can prove difficult given the pressure on them to be stoic and conform to traditional masculine expectations (Pope et al., 2000a; Shepard & Rickard, 2012). Additionally, qualitatively researching others requires the establishment of a good rapport and trusting relationship (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010). Achieving a suitable relationship can take time, but the current autoethnography was not limited by this as I was the focus. The autoethnography constructs a story through temporal fragments that represent the key life experiences, interactions, and influences that shaped my attitudes, perceptions, and meanings associated with muscularity. Specifically, I demonstrate the role muscularity played in constructing multiple masculinity-infused identities and the implications this had on my interactions, behaviours, and decisions in a variety of social contexts. The findings then informed the masculinity and identity focus for the subsequent life-history study in chapter five.

**Introduction**

*“Rarely do modern men fully acknowledge, even to themselves, how much their self-esteem and sense of masculinity is linked to their body image concerns. As a result of these feelings, they may become increasingly focused on deficiencies in their bodies, without really understanding why.”*

*(Pope et al., 2000a p.26)*

In this autoethnography I aimed to reflect on, and comprehend, the roots of my muscular desires and share my experiences of constructing masculine identities and the associated challenges I faced. It was, and is, these ongoing experiences that serve to

validate an image of muscularity that symbolises the identities I perceive my multiple social environments expect of me.

*“One day you will be big and strong and out there with the real men.”* This seemingly harmless statement from my nan is an early insight into the shaping of my muscular embodiment of masculinity that became a blueprint for my identity as a man. By sharing my story, I aim to inspire others to reflect on and share their stories of muscularity and the potential role it may play in their lives and sense of self. In doing so, I could help inform research and the subsequent studies of the potential importance that social context has on the meanings assigned to bodily desires.

Men’s concern with muscularity is not novel and the work of seminal researchers, such as Pope and colleagues, throughout the last three decades has brought male body image concerns to the forefront of research interests. The growing interest in muscularity concerns has given rise to two key conceptualisations discussed in chapters 1 and 2; MD (Pope et al., 1997) and DFM (McCreary & Sasse, 2000). Despite a wealth of evidence for relationships between both DFM and MD and the vast range of variables discussed in chapter 2, such as self-esteem, media influence, weight training, and steroid use (Cafri et al., 2005; Edwards et al., 2014; Tod et al., 2016), there is a lack of understanding of the personal and social experiences associated with these concepts. Such concepts also appear to attempt to overgeneralise muscularity concerns, which may not capture the potential range of contexts and meanings associated muscular desires.

Trying to capture, understand, and support individuals’ muscular concerns and desires is valuable. Existing personal stories of muscularity (e.g., Baghurst, 2012; Fussell, 1991) suggest that, despite showing similar themes, individuals may have different experiences and motivations for desiring increased muscle mass and leanness. Current conceptualisations do not appear to embrace the diverse meanings associated with muscular perceptions, the way these may develop into behavioural desires, or the various roles they may play in individuals’ lives and identities.

The social taboo that appearance concerns are a feminine concept looms over men, and the traditional sense of hegemonic masculinity can restrict the telling of their image-related stories (Connell, 2005; Pope et al., 2000a). The restriction on men's perceived ability to share their experiences and concerns about their bodies makes it a difficult area to research and leaves the understanding of muscular concerns relatively superficial. Pope and colleague's (1997, 2000a) seminal works on male body image provided personal insights into men's experiences and facilitated an awareness of the somewhat secretive crises men face regarding their appearance concerns and the consequences they may have on their lives.

### **Existing Voices of Muscularity**

Existing qualitative research offers some insight into specific muscular experiences, such as the behavioural characteristics associated with extreme muscularity concerns (e.g., MD). For example, individuals with MD demonstrate an excessive preoccupation with being too small, active physique concealment, social impairment, and a prioritisation of weightlifting and nutritional activities (Murray et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2011; Murray & Griffiths, 2015; Pope et al., 1997, 2000a). What the majority of qualitative muscle research lacks, however, are insights into the life-history and temporal lived experiences of individuals. Muscularity research could benefit from the life-history studies, such as autoethnographies, through sharing personal and vivid insights into an individual's progressive development of muscularity concerns and the influential factors, relationships, and effects associated with people's muscular desires. Presenting personal accounts may help create empathy with specific sociocultural experiences and allow readers to reflect on their own muscular perceptions.

One example of muscle-related autoethnography is Baghurst (2012) who crafts a life-long journey through the potential influences and consequences associated with his MD experience. Baghurst's story presents resonating experiences, such as peer comparisons at school and the gym and direct family pressures, that reinforced a need to

address a perceived lack of weight, and specifically muscularity. He also suggests that his experiences did not reflect assumptions made by existing research. For example, there were no attempts to hide his physique or use anabolic steroids, which existing research proposes to be characteristics of MD (e.g., Cafri et al., 2005; Cafri et al., 2006; Chandler, Grieve, Derryberry, & Pegg, 2009; Pope et al., 1997; Thomas et al., 2014). Baghurst's story informs us that not everybody's experience may be represented by existing positivist research or conceptual generalisations of muscularity concerns. Stories, such as Baghurst (2012), suggests that rich and in-depth qualitative research (e.g., autoethnography) could be valuable in demonstrating the diversity of personal muscular experiences.

Books, such as *The Hero's Body* by William Giraldi (2016) and *Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder* by Sam Fussell (1991) provide additional personal views into the development of muscularity concerns and the underpinning motivations for a muscular physique. Fussell vividly depicts the metamorphosis of a skinny young man whose life became engulfed by the subculture of bodybuilding. His story shares how muscularity created a "shell", "personal protection", and "insurance" that overcame his fear and sense of vulnerability in a violent and hostile New York City. Through his story he also opens our eyes to the dynamic cultural interactions (in the gym) that can shape bodily perceptions and provide education on muscle-focused regimen, such as countless hours in the gym and steroid use.

*The Hero's Body* provides a different story of muscularity that resonated with me. Giraldi constructs a story that brings to life the struggles of a young man and his battle with traditional constraints of masculinity. He infers that the development of muscularity may have been a mechanism by which he could abide by the masculine strictures endorsed by his family and society. The resonance and intrigue I experienced from these books is something I sought to achieve by writing the current autoethnography and offering the different challenges I encountered. Existing literature is lacking the diverse stories and experiences that are potentially present within today's society.

The existing, but limited, personal accounts share the idea that muscularity appears to provide some men with a resource or coping tool that helps them resolve life challenges, such as overcoming a sense of inadequacy or vulnerability (Baghurst, 2012; Fussell, 1991) and fulfilling a masculine identity (Giraldi, 2016). Similarly, other qualitative work alludes to muscularity's potential role in resolving identity conflicts, of which masculinity may be one, suggesting that some men will seek muscularity as a way of boosting sense of self, overcoming negative and fragile past experiences, and enhancing one's masculine identity (Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005).

### **Muscle and Identity**

The continuous construction and presentation of identity – the conception and expression of oneself individually or collectively (Krotoski & Hammersly, 2015) - involves balancing one's own needs with the social expectations of society (Erikson, 1959). In Eriksonian terms, we must resolve several sequential conflicts as our identities develop, such as *industry vs. inferiority*, and *identity vs. role confusion*. Erikson argued that these conflicts occur between pre-adolescence and young adulthood stages of development, which is where the current autoethnography directs its focus.

In some young men, their identity conflicts may emerge from a perceived need to conform to an idealised masculine identity that projects features of *hegemonic masculinity* and sub-ordinates other forms of masculinity and femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Courtenay, 2000). Muscularity may play a potential role in identity, especially masculinity (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Klein 1993, 1995), and has been suggested as a form of cultural capital (Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Edwards et al., 2017); social-specific resources that allow social mobility and success (Bourdieu, 1986b, 1990). Muscularity's symbolic role in a masculine identity has been termed masculine and gender capital (Bridges, 2009; de Visser et al., 2009). Masculine capital was used to interpret my muscularity, given its potential to help some men construct a strong sense of self, resolve any masculine identity conflicts (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser &



McDonnell, 2013; Edwards et al., 2017), and fulfil the characteristics associated with masculinity (e.g., stoicism and control, Cheng, 1999; Courtenay, 2000). By possessing masculine capital and enhancing their masculinity men can then also reap social rewards such as power, dominance, and status (Courtenay, 2000; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Young, White, & McTeer, 1994). Despite masculine themes permeating existing stories and research associated with muscularity (e.g., Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Edwards, et al., 2017; Klein, 1993; 1995; Sparkes et al., 2005), it may be just one theme and other individuals may have different identity-related influences that fuel their desire for muscularity or express their muscle-masculinity interaction differently.

One issue with existing stories and research is that they appear to reflect on men who are engaged in extreme muscular subcultures (e.g., bodybuilding; Fussell, 1991) or more specific muscular concerns (e.g., MD or DFM; Baghurst, 2012; Edwards et al., 2017). These stories, although valuable, may not resonate with the more general “muscular population” whose concerns may be grounded in other experiences, perceptions, and motivations. The current lack of diversity in the qualitative muscle literature may limit naturalistic generalisation and maintain the restriction on some men’s willingness to share their own stories. Such restrictions limit our understanding of the range of influences, meanings, and effects associated with muscular concerns. The purpose of the current autoethnography was to offer an additional story that resonated with the more general gym and muscle population as well as indicate further experiences and social contexts that may frame muscular concerns. Presenting my story could help share the underlying, identity-related, meanings associated with my muscular desires, which could inform an understanding of the reader’s own similar experiences and perceptions.

### **Autoethnography: The Power of Storytelling**

Traditional research methods can distil the importance of social context; placing a global focus on the generalisation of a specific subject, such as muscularity (e.g., DFM), without considering its sociocultural setting or interactions. Autoethnography is a form of

reflective self-narrative and storytelling that consists of multiple layers of consciousness

that link the self and personal experiences to wider sociocultural experiences and embraces the complexity and diversity of lived experiences and interactions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Parry & Johnson, 2007; Sparkes, 2000). For example, Carless (2012) constructs an evocative self-expression of negotiating sexuality within school sport. His honest sharing of personal experiences allows often suppressed experiences regarding sexuality to surface and create resonance and a reduced sense of “otherness” (p. 609) for individuals with similar encounters. The current autoethnography aimed to provide a similar temporal, life-history, insight into the potential interactions between different sociocultural experiences (e.g., family, the gym, and work) and my muscular perceptions and desires. Unlike the existing qualitative case studies, autoethnography has unique access to detailed events, emotions, and experiences, which can often get diluted or withheld when exploring others. Autoethnography allowed me to capture the complex interactions between societal expectations (e.g., masculinity) and my body, which embraced the social construction and dynamicity of my self-identity.

Evocative writing styles, such as autoethnography, allowed me to move away from the restrictions of more traditional scientific or realist styles of writing and share my embodied personal experiences, which in themselves become knowledge (Carless, 2012). Exemplars of evocative autoethnography, such as Ellis (1999, 2009, 2013) and Richardson (1997), construct emotion-filled self-reflections that layout their experiences in various roles and settings (e.g., academia). The use of such evocative techniques and approaches to research has also recently permeated the sporting and identity literature; crafting stories that capture and share various experiences. For example, McMahon and DinanThompson (2011) share tales of body socialisation in a swimmer and their risky embodiment (e.g., severe calorie restriction and substance use) of cultural constraints and expectations. This evocative story shares the effects that an embodiment of cultural ideals can have on people’s thought processes (e.g., constant worry), relationships (e.g., coach and parental

pressure), and behaviours (e.g., food fixations). Similarly, others draw on autoethnographic methods to craft artistic stories of eating disorders and excessive exercise behaviours (Stone, 2009), and capture the transcendence and acceptance into masculine subcultures, such as boxing (Wacquant, 2004). The current autoethnography utilizes novelistic and creative writing skills to achieve resonance and transfer the reader into the story, which can create an emotional connection with the narrator facilitated by empathy and shared experiences (Sparkes, 2003).

Although the current study does not proclaim to be an analytical autoethnography, it does present a closing theoretical reflection on the presented fragments. This aligns with the aim of analytical autoethnography of improving theoretical understandings of broad social phenomena (Anderson, 2006), such as muscular desires. By presenting the evocative fragments as a series of temporal experiences, which are separate from the analytical reflection, I aimed to encourage an initial interpretation by the reader. In this sense, the current autoethnography may not be exclusively categorised into evocative nor analytical, but instead offers elements of both approaches to meet the study aims; to achieve resonance, emotion, and offer an evidence-informed basis for understanding one's similar perceptions and experiences.

To address lack of shared personal experiences in existing literature and a potential overgeneralisation of muscular concerns (e.g., DFM and MD), I constructed a story that described the interactions, events, and influences that shaped my muscularity self-perceptions, concerns, and desires. The current autoethnography aimed to make readers aware of similar interactions and sociocultural processes, stimulate self-reflection, and generate knowledge relevant to their personal circumstances (Carless, 2012). Alongside other relevant autoethnographies (e.g., Baghurst, 2012; Carless, 2012), books (e.g., Fussell, 1992; Giraldi, 2016) and case studies (Murray et al., 2011, 2012; Murray & Griffiths, 2015), I am able to share additional insights that suggest muscularity desires cannot always be pigeon-holed and individual experiences are not "black and white". Instead muscular

desires are complex, diverse, and dependent on multiple social and identity contexts.

Specifically, my autoethnography aims to demonstrate how my social interactions and muscularity perceptions shaped the person I am today; a man seeking to construct identities through my body in several social (e.g., family and friends) and muscle-focused (e.g., sport and the gym) environments.

### **Constructing the Story**

The goal of capturing the potentially complex world of muscular desires was guided by interpretivist and social constructivist philosophies, which assumed that knowledge is free of objectivity and socially constructed. This philosophical framing embraces the multiplicity of realities (e.g., my story is one of many) and the construction of knowledge and interpretation of the world through social interactions (e.g., my interactions with family and peers). I recollected the major interactions and events using a life-history approach and created a chronological timeline. Like Carless (2012) I compiled a collection of fragments that consisted of the stand-out events, conversations, and experiences that I felt represented my developing relationship with muscularity.

Constructing the fragments for each event involved listing the key features, noting what happened, who was involved, the emotions that occurred, and the behaviours and decisions these events influenced. Family, friends, and other researchers in similar fields acted as critical friends and a “theoretical sounding board” (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014; Sparkes & Smith, 2002, p. 266). Through informal discussion with these individuals they asked questions of my events, which facilitated the recollection of specific details, stimulated theoretical interpretations, and aided the construction of rich and creative fragments.

Drawing on creative non-fiction, evocative, and emotional writing styles helped with character development, plot creation, and resonance. I sought help from other researchers, who have experience in similar writing styles, and English language experts, who advised me on the writing style. They proof read my fragments several times to ensure I achieved the creativity, resonance, and coherence that I aimed for. First person writing

captured the intimacy of my story and interpretations, aided its flow, and emphasized my individual perspective. Similarly, situating myself within the emerging plot helped achieve relatability and emotional attachment to the masculine threads that underpinned my fragments (Foley, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1995). Using other unique characters (e.g., the father) helped to create a contextual representation of storied events and demonstrated the influence of significant others on my development (Polkinghorne, 1995). When constructing my fragments, identifying a temporal plot provided meaningful connections to the chosen experiences, as well as providing opportunities for readers to make their own interpretations (Polkinghorne, 1995). The plot also offers some insight into how and why I framed my experiences in the way I did (Foley, 1992).

The current findings present a series of creative non-fiction fragments that are written in an “in the moment” style to transport the reader into my experiences and allow room for their independent interpretations. A separate concluding section reflects on my story and offers theoretical interpretations and perspectives. I adopted a two-way, interactive, approach between my data and the literature; searching for themes and golden threads (Raggatt, 2006) that resonated within my story, which guided my search for theoretical concepts. Elements of several theories helped me understand myself and my journey, such as psychosocial development (Erikson, 1959), cultural and masculine capital (Bourdieu, 1986b, 1990; de Visser et al., 2009), and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The theories were useful in providing some interpretation of my fragments without allowing them to overshadow the rich, creative content of my experiences (Foley, 2002).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Autoethnography is not simply a story owned by the author, it carries several ethical concerns regarding the consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of others present within the story as either active participants or background associates (Tolich, 2010). Tolich (2010) proposes some autoethnographical guidelines, such as recognising voluntary

participation, practicing process consent, and being aware of internal confidentiality. I

addressed these ethical dilemmas by a) gaining consent from those involved prior to and during the writing process, b) respecting the potential for harm to others through my story and avoiding/minimising this through careful consideration of chosen content, c) ensuring the discretion of information between the researcher, outside others, and those involved in the story, and d) using pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

### **Evaluative Criteria**

To ensure the study satisfied the credibility expected of a qualitative study we drew on Smith and Caddick (2012) who described a non-foundational approach. The aim of creating a clear and resonating story that could help inform further research and questions was directed by several evaluative criteria (see Table 1).

### **Muscles and Me: The Shaping of Muscular Masculinities**

The following fragments present five identity constructions that represent active attempts at creating multiple masculinity-infused identities. Additionally, the following fragments demonstrate the various, socially shaped, meanings attributed to these muscular expressions of masculinity. Despite all the following identities aligning with a masculine genre, each one demonstrates the multiplicity of masculinity and the influence social context had on the meanings and conflicts I faced.

### **The Evolution of Man: The Birth of Muscular Masculinity**

I am a child blessed with two dads, one with whom I live and get the care and attention a young boy needs, the other the distant biological father whose absence is like a magnet of intrigue. Having never been blinded to the non-traditional family set up I am part of, I am aware that the man who made me is not the man I live with, and the blood that ties us fuels my desire to be close to him. The time comes, like it does every school holiday, to make the 200-plus-mile trip to see my father. I frantically convulse with excitement as I am strapped into the car ready for the long-awaited return to my “real” dad – even the term “real dad” makes him sound appealing, like the “real McCoy” or the “real

deal”. There are always months of build-up, storing the tales I have to share with him and the new things I have learned, all in an attempt to impress and become part of his interests. This overwhelming excitement has been growing since my departure from him at 2-years-old. Despite the love for my step-dad, the burning awareness of my biological father feeds my need to seek connection with him. I feel a void, I am missing the frequent bonding and idolisation the other boys have with their dads. All I have are the yearned-for trips every few months to only have to eventually pack up and leave again.

My biological father is a man who gives off this air of strength, power, and manly competency. He does not resemble any of the dads I see in the playground, he sports a flat stomach with bouldering arms that, to me, are not out of place in a testosterone-fuelled action movie. It is these stand out characteristics that I absorb, the exotic rareness of them energises my intrigue. These bodily features are my tickets to creating my bond. I find myself engrossed, sitting on his sofa, and watching as he swings the cast iron plates around in his living room to the sound of thumping beats of music that is desperately trying to drown out the screech of metal-on-metal and the exhalations of a man at work. The strong smells of machismo fill the room and becomes accentuated by the ever-rising temperature fuelled by my dad’s tireless machine-like efforts. There I remain sat, transfixed, enviously waiting to come of an age where I can have a share in this masculine ritual. Every trip I make I take a piece of him in my memory and I return home with a growing interest in being like him and engrain the image of a man and his role.

On a hot July trip, the day I come of age arrives. I am a little bit taller, not much broader, but still just as keen to sit and learn. Today, however, is different. Today I am to show my commitment to my father and the preaching’s of masculinity, but it is more nerve racking than I thought it would be. It is not the loving embrace you may expect from a father inviting his son to bond, instead it reeks of masculine competition; “You think you can do this, do you think you are strong enough?” he asks. Strength, muscles, and overcoming the deadweight of the dumbbell is reinforced as the key to my masculine

acceptance from my father. The midday summer sun beams through his half-tilted aluminium blinds creating shadowed bars of confinement that allow outsiders a small peak into my father's world of masculine construction. I break the bars of light as they illuminate me re-entering from my dad's bedroom in the oversized vest and nylon shorts he threw at me, tied and double-tied to keep them falling from my muscle-free and shapeless frame. The scene of my evolving manliness is set in a graveyard of weight plates and bars, choreographed to the soundtrack of ear-bleeding volumes of house music that act as a metronome for each rhythmical repetition my dad completes. I do not want to let him down, I want to replicate the smooth and surgical movements of his training tools. I compose myself as he makes up my little dumbbells and proceeds to build himself the mother of all bars that dwarfs mine. This is my first step onto the ladder of masculinity, and I tackle it with my "this is easy" face that is serving to hide the struggle coursing through the rest of my body as my pale shapeless arms tremor through each energy-sapping repetition. My attempts at impressing and carving out my masculine identity is constantly drowned out by the sound of iron swinging back and forth as my dad trains on with ease.

My dad's muscle-focused rituals are coupled with acts of masculine competence; being the strong, capable, protector that I learn are the drivers for these gruelling workouts. My first ménage à trois with the cast iron plates and my father is interspersed with the regular trips to my grandparents' house, which is just a stone throw away over a close-knit cul-de-sac. Finally, my aching muscles can rest, my dad wipes down his now sweat-glossed face and upper body, slips an old battered t-shirt over his perspiration soiled vest, and confidently marches us over to my grandparent's house. It is here his rituals become clear; his muscles symbolise his strength and ability to carry out his role as a man. Having pumped up his much-needed musculature, much like a foreplay for his masculine actions, he checks to see if my grandparents' need anything doing. This serves as a self-promoting statement of "I am a man, I can do anything." Being a newbie the world of muscle



building, I take my place low down in the masculine hierarchy, sat on the work top inside the kitchen with my nan. As I peer through the window in awe it is here she spoke those catalytic words – “big and strong...with the men”. I watch on as dad shows no concern for the physical demand of the jobs that are advertising his masculine strength and capability and providing the context for the gruelling hours of solitary iron-play he endures in his front room. It is all making sense as he is lugging fence posts around like matchsticks and blasting them into the ground with only a few swift slams of the sledgehammer that is powered by his bulging biceps and shoulders. He just cracks on, proclaiming his strength and shouting at my grandad for attempting to lift the huge bundles of wood or rocks that lie in the way of their workspace. “Watch your back, let me do that!” reinforced by my nan also banging the window, chipping in, “Andrew, stop your father picking that wood up,” followed by “Barry, leave that for Andrew!”

My masculine foundations have been laid down by my father, reinforced by nan, and I want to embody the same physical strength and competency. The emerging masculine recipe of muscularity and physical strength has embedded early ideas of what my father and the social world expects of me as an “ideal man”. Using these masculine blueprints, I can now search for opportunities to continue to build and project the notion of strength and masculinity that my dad would be proud of.

### **Size Does Matter: An Emerging Masculine Athlete**

It's September 2001 and I am all set to start high school, a new chapter in my life and a place I can start to project my evolving sense of manliness. With the idea of masculine strength and competency still instilled in my 12-year-old psyche I instantly begin to seek out arenas where I can live out these traits. My school is heavily focused on rugby union, soccer and other activities are not respected here. Rugby is somewhere I, as a man, can put my body on the line, engage in acts of physical competency, and demonstrate my physical strength. Through rugby I can show acts of bodily strength, sacrifice, and competency that my dad would be proud of. The first few weeks at school cement my

initial appeal towards rugby. I cannot help but notice the school's rugby players are god-like, teachers treat these boys differently, and the non-players look on with an appreciation for their bravery and the way they use their bodies to protect the school's reputation. I too am exposed to this awe and the athletic embodiment of masculinity diffusing from the 1st team rugby players. Wandering the network of corridors towards the lunch hall, I can see the hordes of my fellow blazer bound students parting ahead as the older, much larger and more muscular, rugby lads emerge on their way to training. Training bags slung over one shoulder, a blazer stamped with the school sports badge that, like a symbol of masculinity that separates them from everyone else. They confidently strut around the school, standing tall, large chests proud with everybody knowing who they are. I see all the girls turn, giggle, and whisper, all red faced, pointing as these idyllic men walk past. A new string to my masculine bow is being stimulated; masculinity is what I want, but specifically being an athletic rugby player offers me a specific avenue to live up to it and gain the respect and attention I desire from both those around me and my father.

My current masculine blueprints emphasise physical competence and rugby is a place I can start to enact this, but also evolve what I started to build with my dad. I spend my first three years of high school perfecting my rugby skills, spending countless hours stalking and taking on the big lads on the field, proving my worth as a small but strong capable man, and cementing my place in the school team. This will be enough to bolster my masculinity, get noticed, and really advertise my physical capabilities. Here within the world of rugby, however, I apparently cannot rely on competence alone. I find myself, along with my fellow students, flocking to the hallowed rugby field placed in the centre of the school. This is where the first team train, often topless with the sun glistening off their sweat glazed muscular contours. My evolving sense of maleness absorbs these images and I begin to emphasise a connection between being strong and competent, but also looking strong and competent, which can only be achieved through developing the same rippling physiques as those 1st team boys. Being good at rugby is not enough and I need to create

the same muscular shell, like my dad had, to house and advertise my athletic masculinity and competency.

My exposure to these muscular physiques festers within my mind, but I am yet to be overly tainted by them and at 15-years-old my skill has got me here – the 1st team. I sit in the 1st XV changing room for the first time and the pit of my stomach is swirling with feelings of excitement and a splash of confidence; somebody believes in my ability, I have been given the chance. This is it. I will now be up there as this strong athletic man like the others and can fulfil the manly image I have been searching for. What I thought would be the pinnacle of my masculinity is soon to be its down fall. My expectation of masculine enhancement, respect, and recognition for my manly competence as a rugby player is to be shattered with humiliation and shame. Murray, a well-respected player known for his hard-hitting capabilities on the field, comes over brandishing the most pristine set of abdominals I have ever seen. As I struggle to remove my gaze his building block-like abs, I smile, expecting a welcoming introduction to the conclave of the idolised rugby boys. All I get, however, is “Aren’t those pads meant to be skin tight?” as he refers to my loose-fitting shoulder pads. Laughing away the misery I slump back into the corner where I now feel I belong. I look around at the physiques squeezed into their muscle hugging tops and come back to me in my oversized, ill-fitting pads and shirt, I now clearly see where I differ; I do not possess the same assets, I need more muscle.

To further reinforce my bodily deficiencies, we are instructed to make our way to the gym, lined up like a criminal identity parade, stripped down from head to waist, and systematically measured and weighed. I can’t help but to once again take in the god-like physiques of these guys around me and as I shuffle up to the coach with his tape measure a stretch and scales at his feet, I have never felt so intimidated or inadequate. Everybody’s “acceptable” numbers are read out, stimulating not even a quiver of response from anyone, until it gets to me where all I get are looks that scream out “What is he doing here?”. I had not earned enough muscle to buy my membership into this masculine world yet. To really

rub the salt in the wound, the coach adds the crushing words of “We need to get some weight on you!”, which reinforces the need for visual muscularity in my existing masculine blueprints. This sporting experience drills home the fact that ability will only get me so far, but a muscular appearance will get me further. If I don’t look like a man, nobody will accept me as a man. Adonis is not depicted wearing baggy robes to hide a skinny frame. Muscles are clearly the way of showing masculinity, strength, and competency.

### **Pumping Iron: Becoming a Gym Rat**

My 16th Birthday opens the doors of opportunity. The gym. The place, like my dad, I can finally become the man everyone expects of me, the man that will over-shadow that boy cowering in the corner of the rugby changing rooms, a muscular symbol of strength and competence. I am taken under the wing of two older teammates, Jason and Sam. I walk in the wake of these huge and established men as we enter the gym. We burst through the big double doors and people part like the red sea. Everyone regimentally swiping their membership cards, but not these guys, they just get the nod of approval from Marcus, the gym manager. Their gym membership is right there tucked tight into (and bulging from) their sleeves. I am now in the right place, a place of change, and like my dad’s living room this is where men are manufactured. You only need to look around at the physiques on display to see this. You cannot avoid the sound of men grunting their way through their sessions and the screeching of metal as they carve out their bodily statues of masculinity. The scent of what I believe testosterone to smell like lingers and swirls as beads of sweat run down the canal of veins bulging from these guys’ skin. My perception of a muscular masculinity is now exploding to levels beyond what I had already experienced. Muscles *are* masculinity, and the bigger the better. If I can become a gym rat too it will only boost my masculinity everywhere I go.

Nestling in the shadow of my new muscle mentors, I watch as they both fluidly press the 40kg lumps of rusty iron from their chest to the air with ease. My turn. Jason hands me the laughable 14kg miniature versions of theirs. In no way does my attempt look

anything like their elegant performance, with flailing arms, hypothermic shaking of the body, and “beetrooting” of the face. After my very few reps I drop the weights onto the floor, but as I allow the blood to leave my head I am startled by “You can’t just drop them until you get past 20kg’s” Jason asserts through a patronising grin. I take this as if it were gospel and respond; “Oh, sorry J...I didn’t know”

After only a few sessions this weight training malarkey is starting to take over me, it is becoming a ritual, and I am constantly striving to feel that tight, full, and aching feeling of “the pump” in my muscles. I can see why my dad spent those gruelling sessions shaping himself in the confines of his living room. My efforts and exhausted muscles confirm I am on the right track to carving my own manly mould, one symbolised by muscularity, that will shape who I want to be. Like a devoted disciple, I set aside days for the gym - my church of muscular manliness - to edge myself away from my tiny frame and buy into the world of my larger peers. My mornings prioritise the packing of my gym bag and school becomes a trivial necessity; spending my classroom days focused on, and jotting ideas for, that evenings workout. Which body part will we be hitting tonight? Chest? Arms? Back?

Months of dedication pay off and I am eventually blessed with a movement of that needle on the scales up to 10st. Finally, double figures. With the strength of the muscle gods invested in me, I can now officially drop the weights as I rhythmically pump the 20kgs, proving my worth to Sam and Jason as they look on and give the nod of approval. I feel myself grow immediately, head lifted, chest inflated. Here I am on my way to being part of the big boys’ club and finally have some respect of my own, just like my dad. My journey is not complete though, I am still a minnow in this world of sharks and if I want to climb higher I need to keep building.

My immersion in the gym, like my involvement in rugby, has boosted my masculinity, but just like rugby it has also opened the floodgates to a whole new world of comparisons and conflicts, which reinforce my need to improve my strength, get even

bigger, and compete with the new wave of muscle-bound men within this carnival of masculinity. I am trapped in a constant cycle of satisfaction and discontent, but the only way I see to cope is to keep pushing for more. Muscle silently speaks volumes and the monstrous men that surround me have masculinity literally carved into them for the world to see. The bigger guys in the gym are magnets for respect. People quake as these men approach and hastily offer up their workstations or clear the way without any thought. These muscled men exemplify the masculine displays of dominance, power, and superiority that started to appeal to me. Muscularity has permeated various realms of my life to this point, it is valuable not only in the gym, but in my sporting life and in fulfilling my global role as a man, which requires me to keep building, and keep surrounding myself in a sea of muscle.

### **An Occupational Hazard: The Successful Health Professional**

Almost 12 years since my weight training virginity was taken in my dad's small front room and, having started to construct my masculine athletic and gym identities, I have continued on the path of muscular enhancement in search of occupational success – becoming a PT. I shake hands with my new boss, put on my new uniform (a sky-blue polo shirt with the health club logo embroidered on the left pectoral and pair of navy tracksuit bottoms), and begin another journey of seeking bodily perfection (and not just my own). Becoming a PT means I now have the opportunity to be even more frequently immersed in the muscled culture that has helped shape me; I can work and play in the gym. I can continuously build, project, and enrich my muscular image, strength, and masculinity in a new way, one that advertises success, knowledge, and professional competency. I instantly find myself seeking out clients, offering my experience and knowledge to help them with their own fights for the hallowed muscular physique.

After several months of rapport building, I soon find that not every man who enters the gym shares the same desire as me for muscle and Tim (a new client) is one of them; the guy who is surgically attached to the treadmill, wired for sound, and oblivious to works of

muscularity being carved around him. He sits under the radar, not fazed by muscle or its clear benefits as a man and he just wants to be slim. His lack of concern for muscularity, however, gives me a strange sense of reprieve and for once I am not bombarded with talks of muscular ideals or the continuous quest to build the holy grail of traditional masculinity. This relationship leaves me void of the threats, conflicts, and comparisons that my muscular masculine identities have brought me over the years. I feel no need to thrust my muscular competencies at him and affirm my status. Me, my identities, and capabilities are safe in these sessions because I know my muscularity exceeds his and he has no interest in competing with or questioning my muscular status. Muscular comparisons and thoughts are absent, and I can take some time away from the obsessive comparisons and concern for what others think about my physique. I go through the session with full and devoted attention on Tim creating the perfect, uninterrupted, client-PT relationship.

I am not safe for long, however, and quests for muscle enter the gym in two distinct forms; the small man seeking size, much like myself, and the already muscular man (in my eyes) being greedy and seeking more. With both these forms of muscle seeker I begin to sacrifice my client-focus and put myself back in the muscular crosshair. My first encounter with the small man is Geoff, a nervous looking and slight young man. I can see his gaze wandering, anxiously looking around at the other men loading weight after weight onto the bars around him. He explains his desire to be heavier and more muscular. His uneasy relationship with the gym and active attempts to cover his physique – constantly tugging at his long sleeves to cover the miniscule arms that are failing to fill them – fill me with empathy. I start to reflect upon my own struggles with muscularity, that dreaded changing room experiences, and my first time in the gym, enviously eyeballing the muscle-bound men, feeling my own sense of inferiority, and fuelling the ever-increasing drive to be like them.

The fact that I am bigger than him, quite selfishly, gives me a sense of power, friendly dominance, and affirmation of my abilities as a man and a PT. He clearly buys

into, and relates to, my stories of struggle. My superior possession of muscularity allows me to demonstrate my elevated status through meticulous use of my knowledge and experience. I am by no means comfortable in this relationship, however, as his eventual progress means he is on my tail and it isn't long before comparisons cloud our relationship. I still need to remain his superior and source of inspiration, keep one muscular step ahead, and just like my whole life I am forced to increase my quest for muscularity just to maintain my reign over him and assert my dominance.

Being a PT is an emotional rollercoaster and my role and status is never far from being under siege. Another client, Martin, is the second form of muscle seeker; the greedy trainer. He is a large, and already muscular, man on a pilgrimage for more muscularity. He struts into the studio with his flawlessly styled hair, his perfectly contoured pectorals undulating under his tight pristine designer t-shirt, and his lean biceps with the veins bursting through the skin. Every session begins with his ritualistic weigh in, insincere and often patronising pleas for advice that question my competence; "Do you think you can help me boost my chest?" He frustrates me with the same old self-indulging questions, "Do my shoulders look smaller to you?", and the identity-crushing "Can you make me look like Marcus (the large, muscled, gym owner)?" I feel the bitterness build inside me; why does he need more muscle and why does he not want to look like me? Look at him, if anyone deserves more it's me! Swallowing back my developing anger and jealousy, I reluctantly provide the unacknowledged advice and tell him what he wants to hear about his physique. I realise my expected role as a service provider, but I am unable to overlook the comparisons and the resultant identity conflicts that spawn an overwhelming sense of inferiority. I should be the one in a position of power, but it is him dominating this relationship, even if he doesn't know it. My superior knowledge is worthless in this relationship, why would this guy put any trust in me? I can talk the muscular talk, but clearly can't walk the muscular walk in his eyes.



The daily need to assert and prove my muscular masculinity takes its toll, and I sit at home constantly questioning whether I have what it takes to be a PT? Just like my rugby ability, in this situation knowledge isn't enough and my physique is letting me down. It is a constant reminder that no matter where I am, who I am, and what I do muscle is the most valuable thing and I need more to compete with the consistent presence of bigger men and resolve the frequent social conflicts that plague my identities.

### **Story Reflections**

I wanted to avoid forestalling the reader's interpretations, but I offer a brief personal and theoretical reflection on my story. Separating the story fragments from my reflections will provide the reader with the opportunity to consume and respond to my experiences before offering some additional theoretical interpretations. Through the following reflections I aimed to stimulate future questions and critical discussion. The current autoethnography reinforces muscularity's role as a source of masculine capital in facilitating men's identity construction. The current findings also provide insight into the social shaping of the masculine underpinnings of my muscular desires that permeated multiple social contexts and identities. Additionally, my story shares the specific identity conflicts I encountered, which were fuelled by, and resolved with, muscularity.

### **A Symbolic Resource; Muscularity as Masculine Capital**

Throughout my story, and specifically my social observations, interactions, and comparisons, visual muscularity was consistently reinforced as a positive and necessary resource for constructing my masculine identity. Muscularity's role within my identity construction was framed within Bourdieu's (1986b, 1990) concept of cultural capital. The cultural capital I was exposed to in my social fields became actively absorbed into the construction and adaptation of my identities (Bourdieu, 1990, 2001). More specifically, in my stories, muscularity appeared to represent a specific form of masculine capital that helped me create, maintain, and enhance my masculinity (Bridges, 2009; de Visser et al., 2009). I believed that being bigger and having more capital would help construct an ideal

masculine identity, promote my competencies, and enhance my images as a man in various roles, which would help me receive more acceptance, recognition, and status.

My physique and muscularity often represented different characteristics and qualities depending on the social context in which I was situated (e.g., athletic capabilities or professional competency). The different symbolic representations muscle provided for my masculinities contrast the idea of a single masculinity (Connell, 2005). Instead the permeation of masculinity into various social identities suggests that masculinity may be a more fluid and plural concept with different discourses and embodiments of masculinity (Demetriou, 2001; de Visser et al, 2009; Whitehead, 1999).

For example, the muscular masculinity I embodied from my father was tied to acts of physical strength and helping others (what I could do), which reflects more historical ideas of masculinity (Andreasson & Johnsson, 2014; Klein, 1995). In other social fields, however, my visual muscularity and looking the part became prioritised over actual capabilities. A focus on appearance is traditionally seen as feminine (Connell, 2005; de Visser et al., 2009; Pope et al., 2000a), but in my story a tending to a muscular appearance was a central feature of some of my masculine identities (e.g., in the gym) further suggesting the multiplicity of modern masculinity (Gill et al., 2005). Despite the different masculine connotations attributed to my muscularity, however, it was consistently portrayed as a desired and versatile form of capital for shaping a desired masculine identity and positive sense of self (Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993).

Existing literature that links muscularity to masculine capital appears to focus more on muscularity as a compensatory resource that acts as “insurance” to redeem non-masculine behaviours, such as abstaining from alcohol or low self-esteem (Anderson, 2002; de Visser et al., 2009; Klein, 1993). My story, however, frames muscularity as a primary form of masculine capital that not only compensates for a lack of masculinity, but also actively helps enhance and promote one’s existing masculinity and associated traits. The emphasised importance of muscularity within a man’s masculine identities, as is

demonstrated in my story, may encourage them to seek out fields where muscle is abundant (e.g., sport or the gym). In such social fields, muscularity's importance appeared to generate a paradoxical relationship.

My experiences depicted muscularity as a vehicle for satisfaction, identity enhancement, status, and recognition, but it in the presence of social comparisons it also became a source of emasculation, ridicule, and identity-related conflicts. These findings suggest that the interactions within social fields that reinforce muscularity (as masculine capital) as a tool for identity construction, may also be a source of masculine conflict and lead to maintained or heightened desires for muscularity. Such findings may inform existing research of the potential influence of the social field on the development of unhealthy muscle-related conditions (e.g., MD; Pope et al., 1997) and behaviours (e.g., steroid use; Wright et al., 2000).

### **The Birth of Muscular Masculinity; The Role of the Father**

The reinforcement of muscularity as masculine capital occurred through various sociocultural observations, experiences, and interactions, which guided me towards muscular enhancement as a statement of my masculine self (Brown, 1999). In various areas of my life I sought to embody different masculine characteristics and qualities through my muscularity to enhance my social identities and establish preferable status, recognition, and respect. Muscularity's role in embodying masculinity is not something new, a muscular physique is frequently discussed as a central feature of hegemonic masculinity (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Klein, 1993, 1995). What the current autoethnography adds, however, are the fatherly origins of my muscular desires and their attribution to masculine capital, which shaped my embodiment of masculinity. Who I wanted to be appeared to stem from my interactions and observations of my dad, which laid masculine foundations that viewed a man as being strong, competent, and capable. These identity "blueprints" reflected Bourdieu's (1986a, 1990) habitus; the perceptions,

beliefs, and attitudes towards society that are formed through the interactions one is subjected to over time (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1986b, 1990).

My dad's physical muscular stature and masculine displays of strength were absorbed as forms of capital into my own developing masculine identity to become a "man" like him (Bourdieu, 1990, 2001). An amalgamation of muscularity, physical strength, and masculinity was developing, and I soon learned that the masculine role, and being a competent man, (apparently) involved being muscular, strong, powerful, doing heavy duty manual jobs, and helping others (Itula-Abumere, 2013; Mishkind et al., 1989). As my story demonstrates, the father figure plays a critical part in the development of young males and their transition into adulthood (Morman & Floyd, 2006). A child adopts the observed parental behaviours, attitudes, and personality characteristics, and draws on these in their own identity constructions (Mussen & Distler, 1959). The limited muscle-related research that discusses father-son relationships, however, often focuses on negative interactions, such as ridicule and victimisation (e.g., Baghurst, 2012; Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005). My story, however, may suggest that through positive role-modelling early father-son experiences play a crucial part in laying down masculine habitus, which can shape a young man's perceptions of his body and what it represents.

### **Social Shaping of Muscular Masculinity; Creating Conflicts**

The underlying story of masculinity I had started to fashion with my dad facilitated my identity construction, and guided me both towards, and through, various social contexts. The social fields I engaged in (e.g., rugby and the gym) placed increasing value on muscularity as a form of masculine capital. I interpreted the increasing social-specific value of muscularity and integrated it into my developing masculine identities. The current autoethnography offers insight into the masculine threats stimulated by the reinforcement and evaluation of muscularity as masculine capital in various social fields. Specifically, the current study demonstrates the peer comparisons, competition, and ridicule I experienced regarding my physique.

Like existing literature, the socially induced threats I encountered encouraged me to evaluate my muscularity as part of my multiple masculine identities, which questioned my role-specific capabilities and qualities, often leaving me feeling inadequate and emasculated (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005). The threatened masculinity hypothesis suggests that some men will seek to develop muscularity in response to the reduced opportunities to display masculine distinction, dominance, and superiority, usually over women (Mishkind et al., 1989). Similarly, I sought muscularity as a way of reinstating or enhancing my masculine identities and capabilities at times of threat. My desire for increased muscularity, however, was less about a general statement of masculinity or gender dominance and reflected a resolution of the threats to, and conflicts in, my specific social identities and masculinity. For example, having my muscularity questioned in the rugby environment put my athletic competence under scrutiny, threatened my masculine athletic identity, and left me feeling inferior, which led to a desire for increased muscularity. The current socially-specific masculine threats help provide some context to why some men turn to muscularity at times of hardship, threat, and hostility (Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005).

Specifically, I interpreted these masculine threats using Erikson's (1959) psychosocial stages and identity conflicts; focusing on industry vs. inferiority and identity vs. role confusion. By proposing the stimulation of Erikson's (1959) identity conflicts in muscular masculine environments and suggesting muscularity's role as masculine capital in resolving them, the current study may help better define and contextualise the proposal of "activating events" that fuel men's desire for increased muscle mass (Edwards et al., 2017, p. 5). There is currently no research that explores muscularity in relation to Eriksonian concepts or the resolution of identity conflicts. My story potentially stimulates future questions for researchers regarding the value muscularity may hold in Erikson's (1959) stages of development and how it may aid identity construction and conflict resolution in individuals who are surrounded by muscular ideals.

Additionally, the consistent reoccurrence of these identity conflicts in my stories suggest that the Eriksonian psychosocial stages of development may not be rigidly structured. For example, the balancing of my industry (competency) vs. inferiority and identity vs. role confusion were conflicts that continued to reappear throughout my lived experiences, not just at particular stages in my life (e.g., 5-12 and 12-18 years-old respectively; Erikson, 1959). Similarly, a longitudinal study proposed that any psychosocial issues, concerns, or conflicts can (re)emerge and predominate at any given time of an individual's life depending on various biological, psychological and social factors (Whitbourne, Zuschlag, Elliot, & Waterman, 1992). The current findings suggest that it may not be a case of satisfying one conflict before progressing to the next, but instead some men may experience reoccurrences of some conflicts in association with their muscularity and masculinity as a result of various social experiences.

### **Conclusions**

The current autoethnography suggests that muscular desires are grounded in the construction of masculinity. By conducting a life-history approach, the current study was able to share the potential fatherly origins of a muscular embodiment of masculinity. My story suggests that some young men's fathers may shape the foundations of their developing muscular masculine identities. Muscularity's specific role within masculinity appeared to be socially shaped and guided by the other interactions, comparisons, and observations throughout my life-course. These social interactions and experiences placed increasing value on muscularity as an active form of masculine capital that symbolised and enhanced socially desirable characteristics and qualities, which facilitated the construction and performance of multiple social identities all infused with masculinity.

These current findings build on existing research and demonstrate the fluidity of masculinity and the different masculine connotations (e.g., athletic ability, and professional knowledge and credibility) attributed to muscularity in a variety of social settings (e.g., sport and the working environment). Specifically, muscularity's role is demonstrated to be

versatile symbolic source of masculine capital that helps both construct and resolve

multiple masculinity-infused identities (e.g., rugby player and PT) and navigate the various social environments, interactions, and conflicts. The current use of Erikson's (1959) proposed identity conflicts is a novel context with which to interpret muscularity's role as masculine capital in men's identity constructions.

The current suggested role of muscularity in masculinity may inform future studies that existing conceptualisations of muscular desires may lack the sensitivity and diversity to capture the different and fluid meanings of a muscular physique within people's varied and multiple identities. Additionally, future studies may need to explore and understand different social fields and interactions, and embrace that men's masculine identities, the perceived threats, and the resultant physique-related evaluations and desires may be grounded in various contextual meanings. My story is only one of potentially many, and future research could also benefit from sharing additional personal experiences that describe other life-long social interactions that may shape some men's relationships with, and identity-related meanings of, muscularity.

The following chapter builds on the autoethnography by exploring the life-histories of others who, like me, were engaged in the muscled world of the gym and sport. Specifically, I sought to further expand on the social interactions, experiences, threats, and conflicts that may shape and influence men's muscularity concerns and desires as part of a masculine performance narrative. Exploring others' stories and experiences could help capture the potential similarities and diversities of muscularity perceptions, concerns, and desires. The common presence of identity-related conflicts and threats, within my story, that appeared to be both fuelled and resolved by muscularity guided the following study. Given my role as a therapist and my exposure and interaction with the following participants, I became aware of a shared identity threat in men engaged in sport and weight training; injury. The muscularity literature also discusses injury as a common event that provides a threat to men's sense of masculinity (Young et al., 1994). I felt using injury as

an initial talking point, given my role and rapport, could help the men open up about their identity-related threats in relation to their muscularity concerns.



**Table 1**

Chosen qualitative research credibility criteria and actions taken in the autoethnography.

Aim	Criteria	Action
Contribute to the understanding of social life.	Substantive contribution	Novel application of specific theories to DFM (e.g., social capital; Bourdieu, 1984). Autoethnography is also a novel method of examining DFM, which provides an in-depth, rich, approach which is lacking in the current literature.
To have an emotional and intellectual impact on the reader.	Impact	By understanding the first author's experiences, he could begin to contextualise his struggles with muscularity and consider the experiences of others. Additionally, the study could stimulate readers' emotions and generate new research questions.
To present comprehensive evidence for interpretations.	Width	Provided sufficient quotations, and story extracts to support the theoretical interpretations. Made models data etc. publicly available.
To create a complete and meaningful picture for the reader.	Coherence	Created a structured plot, with help from English writing experts, and interweaved the narratives with the literature. This created flow and captured the goal of the autoethnography; to allow the reader to see the world through my eyes.
To leave a lasting impression on the reader.	Resonance	Presented personal and sensitive topics without censoring any details, that could translate into the readers' lives; stimulating sympathetic and empathetic emotions.
Represent the experiences of the participants.	Credibility	Conducted an external evaluation using friends, family, and researchers to ensure a detailed and fair representation of events was achieved, and it also encouraged deeper analysis of the narratives where needed.
To gain critical feedback and employ a transparent research process.	Transparency	Other researchers from various scientific backgrounds also reviewed the study providing transparency. This assistance allowed the study to be critiqued from various viewpoints, much like peer triangulation, to ensure that the study aims, and literature-based interpretations were clearly expressed and easily understood without being lost in the narrative.

## **Chapter Five: “Oh Take Some Man-up Pills”: A Life-History Study of Muscles, Masculinity, and the Threat of Injury**

My experiences and interactions in the previous chapter suggested the importance of life-course sociocultural interactions, observations, and comparisons in shaping a muscular masculinity that permeated multiple identities and social contexts. Through these interactions I embedded visual muscularity, as a valuable source of masculine capital, into the various identities I constructed in attempt to project the desired masculine traits that I felt would benefit me in these social roles. The following study aimed to expand on the autoethnography and explore the muscle-related stories of those exposed to similar social environments (e.g., rugby and the gym), which led to the focus on weight training males. Throughout my story in the previous chapter I reflected on several experiences that threatened my masculinity and stimulated conflicts within my identities. These conflicts questioned my masculine competency, and status, which stimulated a self-evaluation of my muscularity.

Muscularity's role in both stimulating and resolving these conflicts guided the decision to explore others' muscular desires and muscularity's role in constructing their masculine identities and resolving any potential identity conflicts. My role as a sports therapist gave me access to individuals who frequently expressed identity and physique-related concerns associated with injury. Injury is a common event that can threaten a man's identity and muscular self-perceptions, which is demonstrated in the literature (Sparkes et al., 2005; Young et al., 1994). The following study presents the role muscularity played in a masculine performance narrative, and how the socially constructed meanings attributed to muscularity may have shaped and framed narrative responses to the identity-related threats of injury.

### **Introduction**

Many men desire an identity centred around muscularity. Several concepts are present in the literature that aim to capture the dissatisfaction, drive for, and clinical

preoccupation with muscularity. These concepts include muscle dissatisfaction (Tylka et al., 2005), DFM (McCreary & Sasse, 2000), and MD (Pope et al., 1997). These concepts have the potential to influence negative emotions and psychological well-being, such as low self-esteem, negative affect, and anxiety (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Chittester & Hausenblas, 2009; Edwards et al., 2014; Pope et al., 2005). Additionally, they can influence more severe negative health concerns such as depression, psychological distress, eating disorders, and substance abuse (Blashill, 2010; Edwards et al., 2014; Pope et al., 2005). Given the potentially detrimental effects of muscularity concerns, it is important that we understand why men may develop a desire to be more muscular and the potentially different effects this may have on their lives.

Masculinity offers a potential trigger for men to desire an increase in muscle mass. The possession of a muscular physique and images of strength appears to run parallel with dominant projections of masculinity and social desirability (Galli & Reel, 2009; Monaghan, 1999; Steinfeldt, Gilchrist, Halterman, Gomory, & Steinfeldt, 2011b). For example, muscularity is a “primary sign of manhood”, and is associated with male success, intimidation, and status (Morrison et al., 2003, p. 117). One theoretical perspective often applied within the muscle literature is the threatened masculinity hypothesis, and the idea that men use muscularity to reassert their dominance over women and overcome reducing opportunities for men to project their manly identities (Klein, 1993, 1995; Mills & D’Alfonso, 2007; Swami Neofytou, Jablonksa, Thirlwell, Taylor, & McCreary, 2013). This hypothesis offers a backdrop for the existing quantitative muscularity literature, such as the correlations between gender role stress, conflicts with society’s expectations of men, male sex-specific attitudes and behaviours, and muscular concepts, such as DFM (McCreary et al., 2005; Schwartz, Grammas, & Sutherland, 2010a; Swami et al., 2013; Swami & Voracek, 2012). Existing quantitative research, however, often uses preconceived hegemonic masculine traits and attitudes (e.g., dominance, power, and superiority; Swami et al., 2013; Swami & Voracek, 2012). These assumptions may not

account for every man's perception of muscularity and not all men will seek to construct the same traditional masculine image or internalise the same characteristics into their identities. The potential for diverse narratives and experiences inspires more in-depth and qualitative explorations of muscularity and masculinity.

Existing qualitative muscularity research offers some insight into men's muscle-masculinity interaction. For example, some researchers share the symbolic and emblematic role muscularity plays in men's attempts to reassert their hegemonic status over women within society (Gillett & White, 1992; Klein, 1993, 1995; Monaghan, 2002). Others more recently have offered other masculinity-related perspectives and shared stories of gaining acceptance from male figures (e.g., father), dealing with victimisation, and generally creating a positive sense of self (e.g., Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005). The various qualitative insights allude to muscularity's central role in the construction of a masculine identity.

It is also apparent in the literature that many men attempt to balance their muscularity within their cultural walls (e.g., the gym) to maintain a desired identity that embodies a socially acceptable muscular masculinity (de Visser et al., 2009; Klein, 1993). Muscular masculinity is a term that arose from the Schwarzenegger and Stallone era where muscles were symbols of traditional masculine traits; violence, stoicism, and control (Messner, 2007). Muscular masculinity is useful for describing muscularity's role as capital and a key feature of a "manly" identity. Visible muscularity is not the only physical component of masculinity and other features include being tall, having facial hair, and having a full head of hair (Butler, Pryor & Grieder, 1998; Neave & Shields, 2008; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005). Visible muscularity is particularly relevant, however, along with muscular function (i.e., strength), when considering the growing desire for a muscular physique and investment in behaviours that target increased muscle mass. For example, a rise in muscle-focused behaviours, such as weight training and supplement use, is increasingly observed in modern society (Pope et al., 2000a)

Within some men's identities, muscularity appears to represent a form of masculine capital that can validate one's masculinity and be exchanged for power and social rewards, such as recognition, acceptance, and prestige (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1990; de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013). Deriving status, recognition, and establishing an identity through appearance and image-related practices is increasingly evident within contemporary societies. For example, individuals are often defined by their embodiment and associated body projects (Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 2013), with modern men spending more time than ever before on "grooming" and their appearance (Brown, 1999; Gill et al., 2005; Hall, Gough, & Seymour-Smith, 2012).

Masculine capital is also an important compensatory resource for a lack of competence in other areas of masculinity, such as being short or lacking muscle mass (de Visser et al., 2009; Klein, 1993). Similarly, possessing masculine capital can empower men to maintain their masculine identity while resisting or abstaining from some traditionally masculine behaviours, such as athletes who do not drink alcohol (de Visser et al., 2009). The capital value of a muscular physique is, however, dependent on the social context. For example, in some social contexts a muscular model displaying his physique is often perceived as less masculine than a muscular athlete using his body for competitive or functional uses (de Visser et al., 2009). These contextual differences allude to the diversity of muscular and masculine meanings and inform the need use a broader perspective and an exploration of different individuals' stories.

Various types of masculinities exist in society and a man's construction of masculinity may be dynamic and consist of various, sometimes conflicting, practices (Anderson, 2005; Anderson & McGuire, 2010; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Like Bourdieu's (1986a) notion of habitus, these different masculine attitudes and practices may be learned through observations within specific cultures or social interactions. Further investigation is needed to understand the symbolic role muscularity plays as part of men's evolving masculine identities, and specifically we need to embrace the potential diversity

in masculine expressions and the meanings of a muscular physique that may develop over time and across different contexts. Existing research, however, tends to target specific muscular populations (e.g., bodybuilders) whose perceptions and motivations for muscularity may differ from other men. This limited contextual focus may restrict our understanding of muscles and masculinity, leaving muscular research dominated by rigid traditional and culturally specific views of masculinity.

An in-depth and comprehensive life-history approach would allow for a personal, rich, and temporal expression of experiences, which could provide a more expansive and personal context to the men's muscular desires and capture the potential variance in the development and meanings of muscular masculinity. The purpose of the current study was to present the life-histories of 10 weight-training men and explore their muscular desires. Specifically, I aimed to understand the role of muscularity in constructing and managing their masculinity-infused identities. A life-history and narrative approach was adopted to ascertain the evolution of the men's muscular desires and how they framed their muscle-related experiences. By conducting the present study, I can offer an insight into the potentially different expressions of muscular masculinity and the way these may influence the men's responses to identity threats and conflicts. In doing so the current study can begin to inform future research of the narratives that may shape and guide muscular masculinities. The current study could help stimulate new research questions that may embrace the diversity of men's muscular masculine perceptions, meanings, and desires, which would advance the current traditional, hegemonic, backdrop for muscles and masculinity.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The current study is based on the life-history interviews of 10 white, male, weight trainers aged between 19 and 40 years-old. All ten of the men constructed similar overarching masculine narratives but appeared to frame their experience of identity

conflict and the threat of injury in one of three narratives. Three of the men were current Rugby Union athletes, one played amateur soccer, one competed in endurance obstacle racing, and five were non-athletes who regularly engaged in recreational weight training. All 10 men had notable muscular physiques and engaged in weight training at least four times per week and demonstrated a clear investment in muscularity, which was evident in their use of legal supplements and frequent conversations about, and focus on increasing, muscularity.

### **Recruitment**

I knew all the men through my role as their sports therapist and had been treating them for a variety of musculo-skeletal injuries prior to the commencement of the research. These men were chosen because they frequently alluded to identity conflicts in relation to their injury, which was used represent an event that could stimulate a perceived threat to their sense of self (Young et al., 1994). My role as the men's therapist upheld the professional codes of trust, confidentiality, and respect. This trusting relationship created a good rapport between me (the researcher) and the prospective participants, which is beneficial when engaging in life-history and sensitive research topics (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006). In the current study for example, having confidence in my integrity meant participants may have felt more comfortable discussing their experiences and allowed the gathering of rich detail. The men, however, were not aware of the study or invited to partake until their treatment and rehabilitation had ended, and any conflicting relationships had expired. After an institutional research ethics committee provided clearance for the study, and the men had agreed to participate, data collection commenced.

### **Procedure and Data Collection**

The current study used a life-history methodology, which can capture individuals' inner experiences in relation to ever-changing life events (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Knowing how muscularity concerns and desires develop, are maintained, and influence an individual's life is necessary to be able to manage developmental patterns and minimise

dysfunction (Ricks, 1974). The life-history data came from a series of one-to-one, semi-structured, interviews. The men chose the interview location and time, where they also provided demographic information and written informed consent. Prior to conducting the interviews, I familiarised myself with the existing literature and theory. Reading through transcripts and similar investigations (e.g., Edwards et al., 2017; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006) helped inform the interview process and sensitised me to the issues and considerations that could potentially emerge during the study. Having been seriously injured myself, and being a sports therapist, I was familiar with potential issues, experiences, and appraisals associated with injury, allowing me to relate to the participants and make informed interpretations from the data and co-construct representations of the men's lived experiences.

The initial interview procedure consisted of one open-ended question – just tell me a little about your injury experience? – which stimulated discussions around the men's muscular perceptions and their injury experience. Interviews with a flexible structure allow for breadth and depth of qualitative insight (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006). A pilot interview assessed the capacity for the interview to engage the participants and allow them to guide discussions and give a personal representation of their experiences. The lack of a strict structure during the interviews placed the participants in control and allowed unpredicted topics to emerge (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010). I was an active and empathetic listener, aiding the participants in telling their stories, and fully capturing their experiences. Each participant had at least 2 interviews, which lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. On some occasions, I would come across the men in the fitness centre and impromptu conversations regarding the study would occur. Verbal consent was gained to use any content discussed in these passing conversations.

A life-history timeline aided the interviews, encouraging the recollection of life experiences and influential events and creating a backdrop for the participants' narratives (Edwards et al., 2017). When given the timeline, like Wolcott (1994), the men were asked



a “grand tour” question and encouraged to provide accounts of their lives and share any key, stand-out, events, people, and influences. Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm and social constructionist assumptions, using the timeline, myself and the interviewees co-constructed a representation of the participants’ lives. Creating a rich portrayal of the men’s experiences helped achieve a greater understanding of their social environments, experiences, and shaping of their muscular desires and responses to potential identity conflicts.

All participants were given the opportunity to comment on the transcripts and interpretations during follow-up interviews in a process of member reflection. All participants engaged in at least 1 additional interview, and their awareness of the study topic appeared to encourage them to further engage and build on their discussions. These follow-up interviews allowed for the collection of additional rich data. The interaction allowed me to explore initial ideas and expand and clarify specific details, ideas, or other findings. Reflective notes after interviews informed future participant interactions and data analysis. Reflecting on the interviews with other researchers allowed me to identify, debrief, and make sense of my initial interpretations and assumptions, as well as assess my role in the interview process.

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim using pseudonyms to protect the participants’ identities. The initial stage of analysis involved narrative indwelling, whereby I immersed myself in the transcripts, reading them several times, listening to the audio recordings, and making preliminary notes about initial impressions of the data (Smith, 2016; Allan, Smith, Côté, Martin Ginis, Latimer-Cheung, 2018). The current study conducted a dual-narrative analysis that involved both thematic and holistic form structural analyses (Lieblich et al., 1998; Perrier, Strachan, Smith, & Latimer-Cheung, 2014).

The thematic narrative analysis enabled the identification of the central themes and patterns that underpinned the men's stories and captured "what" the men were saying about their muscularity and its symbolic role in their lives. Analysing the thematic content consisted of identifying key sentences, words, and phrases (Reissman, 2008; Smith, 2016). To aid theme identification, I asked questions of the data, such as "what is the common theme(s) or thread(s) in each story?" and "what occurs repeatedly within the whole story?" (Smith, 2016, p. 264), as well as "what is the relationship between emerging themes?" The selected content helped summarise the semantic (apparent) and latent (underlying) meanings of the data (Smith, 2016). Generating the themes used a hybrid approach that drew on both inductive and deductive approaches, which reflected a two-way interaction that moved between the data and theory and vice versa (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

During the data analysis process, an analytical bracketing technique allowed for a shift in orientation between the what's (e.g., content) and the how's (e.g., structure) of each participant's story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Specifically, bracketing the thematic analysis and narrative content, allowed a focus on how and why the current men structured their narratives in the way they did. The holistic-form structural narrative analysis focused on plot organisation and identifying narrative resources and types (Allan et al., 2018; Lieblich et al., 1998; Smith, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The analysis process involved questioning the men's stories to identify the potential plots and the types of narrative(s) the men used to frame their experiences. To help identify the plots, narrative types, and their impact I questioned the men's stories as follows; "what was the desired outcome of the men's stories?", "where did their stories originate?" and "what strategies did they employ to achieve their desired narrative outcome?" Asking these questions identified the inspirations, directions, and benefits of the men stories as well as the behaviours, emotions, and perspectives guided by them (Smith & Sparkes, 2005; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

An overarching, dominant, narrative that provided a backdrop for the men's muscular desires, and 3 additional response narratives helped frame attempts to minimise

narrative wreckage and maintain a sense of masculine self. Analysing and bracketing the life-history content and structural narrative plots created a temporal context to the participants' responses and facilitated a more profound understanding of the meanings attached to the men's muscular physique and the responses and strategies employed to maintain their desired image at times of threat (e.g., injury).

### **Research Credibility**

I adopted Smith and Caddick's (2012) non-foundational approach to research credibility. Starting with my aims, I identified suitable criteria by which the study should be evaluated and then implemented a research design that ensured we met these criteria. In Table 2 I present criteria, proposed by Smith and Caddick (2012), which was selected to ensure the credibility expected of the research, to aid the achievement of the study aims, and create resonating stories of muscular masculinity and identity conflict.

### **Interpretation and Discussion**

The following section combines the key features of the men's narratives with theoretical concepts and existing muscularity and masculinity literature to clearly demonstrate the interpretations I made of the men's stories. This is an approach used by Papathomas & Lavalley (2014) that integrates the narrative data and theoretical conceptions, which generates a clear understanding of how my interpretations relate to the participants' stories.

The current study identified a dominant masculine performance narrative that framed all the men's relationship with, and desire for, muscularity. Firstly, I summarise the "make-up" of, and symbolic meanings of muscularity within, this dominant narrative, before discussing the structural plot and influential experiences that coherently tied the men's experiences and muscular desires together. Secondly, I describe the key features and the temporal structure of the 3 realignment narratives that demonstrated the men's response to the potential narrative wreckage and threat to their identities and masculine performances caused by injury.

**“It’s All About Being a Man”; Performing Muscular Masculinity**

The men’s stories of muscular desire and masculinity appeared to reflect a performance narrative. Traditionally, a performance narrative is characterised by a self-oriented focus on competing, winning, and gaining social status and esteem in the context of sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Winning appears to be a central facet of the male story-line in sport that helps enhance a man’s masculine identity (Dowling Næss, 2001). The current men’s narratives, however, did not focus their muscular desires towards sporting success. Instead the performance of global muscular masculine identities provided a sense of achievement and status across several domains. Matt described the link between muscularity and muscular performance; “[I] train to get bigger...if I look good [muscular] then I’m alright...[I]feel like as a man I’m achieving something if I’m looking good [muscular]”.

Similarly, a muscular physique appeared to allow the men to compete on a masculinity level and be the best, which allowed them to establish a favoured position in the masculine hierarchy (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Klein, 1993; Kimmel, 1999; Sabo, 2000). For example, in the current study, Sean reflected on how his muscularity and weight training gave him a sense of superiority over other men and allowed him to advertise desired masculine attributes;

Muscle represents that alpha male, masculinity, [and] power that I want everyone to see in me...I think it [being muscular] is that competitive edge [over other men]... just constantly wanting to prove yourself or be the best... and if you don’t go to [weight] training then you’re kind of cheating yourself out of it type thing.

The current men’s expression of muscular masculinity echo the existing proposals that men’s bodies are social projects, with a muscular, mesomorphic, shape being tied to cultural notions of masculinity and a symbolic sign of manhood, representing strength, power, confidence, bravery, and control (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan, 2008, 2008; Klein, 1993; Morrison et al., 2003; Dowling Næss, 2001; Shilling, 2013). The current

research tends to focus on a muscular “shape” and visual muscularity as an emblem of masculinity (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan, 2008; Klein, 1993, 1995). This focus on visual aspects of muscularity was echoed by Dale; “Obviously, big, lean, big. [Makes you] yeah just more like imposing I suppose... It’s all about being a man. The biggest man...a real man”. Dale’s focus on a muscular image within his perceptions of masculinity reflect the preferred male body image that favours the mesomorphic appearance, characterised by well-developed chests, arms, and shoulders, with slim hips and waists (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan, 2008).

Some of the current men, however, seemed to place less primary focus on physical image and emphasise other facets of muscularity, such as its functions and what it could do, as symbols of their masculinity. This functional emphasis for muscularity reflects the more historical views of a masculine body, whereby the male body was associated with physical labour and its capabilities (Andreasson & Johnsson, 2014; Klein, 1995). Industrialisation is said to have rendered physical strength and manual physical work as obsolete leaving visual muscularity more valuable in representing a masculine identity (Klein, 1993, 1995), but Andy’s functional focus suggests that muscular function is still a key masculine resource for some men;

Now, [muscle] size yeah it’s a massive thing... [but] it has got to be functional you know... There is no point just being like a walking fridge and not being able to do anything... You know as a man, you have got to be fit in yourself... If you can get about [referring to fitness and functionality], you’ve got that presence and that size, but also that physicality [strength and power] then you know don’t sort of fear nobody really.

The presence of different expressions of muscularity (e.g., form and function) as part of the current men’s masculine performances suggests that muscular desires are more diverse than existing research may insinuate. The different muscular expressions alluded to the potential influence of social context on the constructions of masculinity. The current

findings demonstrated how the men's performance narratives appeared to originate from the early observation and interactions with their male family members; following a plotline of observation, construction, and enactment.

### **Observing a Man; Setting the Masculine Tone**

The men all discussed early observations of familial male role models as key influences in their masculine perceptions. These observations appeared to create identity "blueprints" and lay the foundations for the men's masculine ideals. For some, muscularity was introduced as a masculine symbol early in the lives, such as Josh who shared the idolisation of his brother's physical stature and how this became his basis for masculinity;

Growing up around my brother and seeing somebody who was like an alpha male almost, you know he is a big bloke. So that's kind of what I always wanted to be... My brother has always been central to this [masculinity], at 8 years my senior and naturally bigger [more muscular] I had always seen my big brother as the epitome of masculinity.

A comparison with bigger and more muscular siblings does appear to stimulate the perception that muscularity, physical size, and strength are defining features of a successful and respected masculine body (Sparkes et al., 2005). Some men, however, were not originally exposed to a focus on stature or muscularity in their early masculine observations, but instead recalled other masculine characteristics, such as hard work, commitment, and sacrifice that formed the basis of their masculine performances. For example, Andy describes his observation of his father;

Dad was a key role... Set the tone yeah...He grafts sort of 12, 13, 14 hour days... he [Dad] has always been a hard worker and stuff like that makes you want to push harder... He's probably sacrificed a lot in the past. You know turning out every Sunday [for me] playing [rugby] as a kid...dedicating his time [to me]...You know, that's the tone [for my identity], and that's how it is. It is all I have ever known...

Some young men appear to engrain the personality features, attitudes, behaviours of their fathers and male siblings to construct and shape their own masculine identities (Mormon & Floyd, 2006; Mussen & Distler, 1959; Sparkes et al., 2005). As is evident in the current study, masculine identities seem to be actively produced through social interactions and drawing on available resources, such as the attitudes, appearance, and behaviours the current men observed (Dowling Næss, 2001). These resources “set a tone” for the current men’s developing masculine identities, which guided their behaviours and decisions. The impact of these masculine resources and messages on the men’s identities reflected Bourdieu’s (1986a) concept of habitus, which guided their future masculine practices (e.g., the participation in sport and weight training).

### **Constructing a Man; Embodying Muscular Masculinity**

The current men’s decisions to engage in sport and weight training appeared to be guided by a desire to emulate their male role models and construct identities that projected similar masculine characteristics, which echoes Messner (1990a p. 438);

“boys do not come to their first experiences in organised sport as ‘blank slates’ but arrive with already ‘gendering’ identities due to early developmental experiences and previous socialisation”.

Sport seems to further shape a man’s perception of what it means to be male and promote specific values, such as strength, competitiveness, success, and hard work (Messner, 1990b, 1992). The current men demonstrated an amalgamation of the social resources they had available to them, such as the early observations of their family members and the sporting values they became aware of. For example, Andy demonstrated how the values promoted by sport aligned with his early constructions of masculinity, making it an appealing practice to facilitate his masculine performance;

[In rugby] you have got to commit yourself, you got to have hard work, you have got to make sure you are dedicated to it. So yeah, all three aspects [from my dad] tie into that...[he] worked hard in what he does [which] made me want to work

harder on the rugby field. Made me want to train harder in the gym and made me want to put the hours in you know like he does.

Despite not all the men's initial role model observations focusing on muscularity, the social worlds of sport and weight training, appeared to catalyse the infusion and reinforcement of muscularity into these men's masculine constructions. The existing research shows that bodybuilding and weight training appear to ascribe social meaning to a hypermuscular physique and encourage the embodiment of masculinity (Brown, 1999; Jefferson, 1998; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 2002). Dale demonstrated a similar influence of the gym on his construction of a muscular masculine identity;

You just see it, it's like everywhere in the gym isn't it... Everyone who looks good now looks big...[In the gym] there's like a group of lads that are bigger and leaner and everyone always looks up to them...It [muscularity] fuels everything [the sense of masculinity]...it [muscularity] becomes in there then doesn't it [pointing to his head]...you're always aiming to be like that...it's more of an ego man thing that you want to be the biggest.

As well as developing a visually muscular physique, using the body as strong and functional machine appears to contribute to some of the men's masculine constructions and sense of identity (Messner, 1990b; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Ridge, 2006). For example, Andy described the social reinforcement in his sport that emphasised the value of muscular functionality alongside stature, which he drew on to facilitate his overall masculine performance;

You know coaches, senior people [teammates] bang on about physicality [referring to muscular function] and also having that manly presence [muscular physique]...being in that environment, seeing [other] players and stuff...Yeah modelling on other players wa' a massive thing...I'd find out what they were doing and do it myself thinking that I might look like them [big and muscular] or become like them [fit and strong]...That's where the mindset of wanting to be bigger and



stronger sort of came from...I have built myself [to be] functional...Mine [physique] is all down to athletic, athletic look never wanna look like any bodybuilder. Never wanna be the biggest just want to feel that I'm fit, I'm functional, I've also got the power there ...it shows I have got some determination in there, I have got that desire to want to push on in life, like my dad.

The accumulation of muscularity, both the visual and functional aspects, as a symbolic resource reflected Bourdieu's (1986a) concept of cultural capital. Specifically, a muscular physique and functional strength became valuable sources of masculine capital (de Visser et al., 2009). This masculine capital helped them construct their desired gendered identities, symbolised the positive male attributes they absorbed from their social interactions, and were a key part of their masculine performances. The existing qualitative literature suggests that men hold the perception that more masculine capital leads to a higher status, and specifically "more muscle means more masculine" (Beagan & Saunders, 2005, p. 163; de Visser et al., 2009). Dale alluded to this belief that muscle was the key to status and respect, and the more one had the better;

You want to go a bit more [referring to building muscle and weight training], then a bit more, and you always like. You're never satisfied... You always want to be bigger [more muscular], maybe there's a bit of, yeah, manly status [in being more muscular]...yeah [you] always want to be top dog all the time I suppose... I suppose it is a respect thing...the more muscular you are the more you are respected.

The men's early observations and social interactions appeared to inform their perception of the body as a site of social communication, reinforced the capital value of muscles, and shape the construction of a muscular masculinity, which became embedded in an overarching performance narrative (Brown, 1999; Monaghan, 2002). Specifically, sport and weight training allowed the men to express desired social symbols (e.g., control and

determination) through their muscularity that advertised their masculine identities (Messner, 1990b, 1992; Dowling Næss, 2001).

### **Enacting a Man; Performing Muscular Masculinity**

Bodies have become a “means for self-expression, for becoming who we would most like to be” (Giddens, 1991 p. 2). By seeking to build their socially informed masculine capital (muscularity) and incorporating it into their identities, the current men could embody their masculinity and successfully enact various masculine performances. Malcom expressed a how his visual muscularity was a valuable resource for his masculine performance and expressing an identity that suggested power and confidence;

[As a man] your presence has to be felt without you saying or doing anything. And a lot of that can come through with how you present yourself. And that’s, and I think [my] physique has a lot to do with that... I can introduce myself in a kind of powerful fashion, a confidence from the whole physique.

Similarly, Josh explained how his muscularity allowed provided him with a “power” and confidence in his perceived ability to physically dominate and look after himself;

Our views of dominance, success and being that masculine man are being big, powerful, and being able to physically dominate... a situation where there is somebody who is trying to exert power over [me]...[I know] I could still kick the f\*\*\* out of him...it’s nice to have that, that you almost, that you kind of have that in your locker... you have that affirmation through being muscular that yeah I can, I can hold my own... I quite like having my kind of power [referring to his muscularity].

Like Josh suggests, muscularity does appear to help achieve a more favoured masculine status through signifying power, hardness, and intimidation (Brown, 1999; de Visser, 2009). A masculine performance was a fundamental part of all the current men’s identities, both generally and within the social context of sport and weight training, which appeared underpin their devotion to building muscle. Bodybuilding and a devotion to increasing

strength does to allow an embodiment of the masculine stereotype and represent an active opportunity to achieve a coherent narrative self-identity (Fox, 1998; Monaghan, 2002; Mosse, 1996). Similarly, the act of weight training became an essential practice for all the current men and reflected a desire to accrue masculine capital and bolster their masculine identity performances (Jefferson, 1998). The men could “work on” their bodies as projects through weight training and “build something of value” that was etched with a statement of masculinity (Wagner, 2016, 2017, p. 583), as Sean described;

[without my muscularity] I think people would just think I am just a normal bloke...[big, muscular, men] are just like big enforcers type thing...I quite like the fact that when I walk into a room just the way I look or the way I hold myself people think “I wouldn’t f\*\*\* with him”. I often think that is what the gym gives me, is that ability to put [muscular] size on...and people are just like “f\*\*\* me”...muscle makes me someone that people will take notice of.

The investment in a single performance narrative, however, had the potential to become problematic when the men’s experiences and practices (e.g., weight training) no longer fit this narrative type (Frank, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2005). In the current study, the occurrence of a disruptive event (e.g., experiencing an injury) was incompatible with the structure and intent of their dominant masculine performance narrative; to be a muscular, strong, and capable man that projected desired male traits. The incompatibility between the injury experience and the men’s masculine performance narrative reflected what Frank (1995) termed narrative wreckage and consequently posed a threat to the men’s sense of self and masculine identities (McAdams, 1993; McLeod, 1997). Injury, specifically, as a life event does appear to have ramifications for a man’s sense of self and masculinity (Young et al., 1994, White, Young, & McTeer, 1995; Young & White, 2000). Specifically, being injured often results in a loss of muscle mass, which appears to evoke a sense of inadequacy, inferiority, and a loss of power in some men (Sparkes et al., 2005), which in the current study reflected a threat to the men’s overall masculine performance.

In response to the potential wreckage of the performance narrative the current men abided by, the men expressed three different narratives. These responsive narratives aimed to achieve some restoration and maintenance of their desired masculine performance narratives, which inspired the term *realignment narratives*. Like their overarching performance narrative, the realignment narrative types all appeared to be shaped by both the men's masculine observations and the social environment and interactions the men experienced. The men expressed 3 different realignment narrative types (*reliance*, *redemption*, and *relapse*), which all demonstrated different responsive behaviours that were shaped by the social and cultural values they embodied.

### **Realignment Narratives; Three “R’s” of Maintaining Masculine Performance**

**The reliance narrative.** In response to the threat of injury, 6 men expressed a reliance narrative whereby they demonstrated a narrow adherence to their socially shaped masculine ideals and the associated behaviours and attributes (Gerschick & Miller, 1994). The reliance narrative appeared to reflect elements of a stability genre, in which the men's trajectory of experiences and identity remained relatively unchanged (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). In the current study, the men firmly relied on, and adhered to, muscular and masculine messages from their role models and social fields. By adopting this reliance narrative, the men were able to minimise alterations to their sense of identity and prevent any diversion from their overall performance narrative. The specific plotline that the men used to structure their narrative and maintain stability in their identities and masculine performances was *rejection*, *adherence*, and *preservation*.

The initial threat posed by injury to these men's masculine performances appeared to be related to their muscularity (and the act of building it) and its symbolic value in their identities. The 6 men appeared to prospectively discuss the threat of injury posed to their muscular masculinity despite the injury being in the past. As Sean described; “if I don't do it [keep training], I won't gain anything. I won't keep my size and strength, I won't be better than the next person.” This future perspective used to frame the potential losses

suggested that these men refused to accept the injury, which extinguished the threats that came with being injured. Jack demonstrated this through his dismissal of injury as a way of negating the threats to his muscularity;

I was aware of my back, but I just put it out of my mind and got on with it...I just found ways to train through it...I didn't want to get smaller and lose what I had. I didn't want to lose my size.

Injury exhibits failures in one's ability to conform to normative masculinity, and the acceptance and display of pain is traditionally seen as non-masculine (Courtenay, 2000; Spencer, 2012; Young et al, 1994). Enduring injury and suffering, as demonstrated by the current men, is a mark of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Courtenay, 2000; Young et al., 1994; O'Brien, Hunt, & Hart, 2005). The reliance narrative reinforced the masculine view of not succumbing to pain, as Malcom described;

It [the injury] got to a point where it was getting worse rather than better. But you know, you don't really want to ask for help do you...I think that's, yeah there's something, definitely some element of er, er alpha male type you know...you just kind of battle through it.

The rejection response to their injuries led to these men continuing their normal practices (e.g., weight training and sport) because not adhering to these was not a viable choice within their masculine performance, as Jack stated; "I was never going to not train...it just wasn't an option". Not altering their practices or seeking help is recognised as a way of continuing to perform masculinity; demonstrating independence, strength, and lack of vulnerability (Courtenay, 2000; Gill et al., 2005). Specifically, by following a reliance narrative, rejecting their injuries, and continuing with normal training the current men could maintain their perception of masculine respect and status, which helped preserve their masculine performances, as Sean explained;

I would still be doing something training wise...[by still training] everybody would go "oh you're mad just rest, you're mad just rest" but you'd be stupid just resting...

if I don't do weights I will lose all this size...[you feel like] everybody's [in the rugby and gym environment] like questioning you [as a man and an athlete]...I just feel like people just lose respect for you really [if you don't train through injury] because you are not doing what they are doing, challenging the body you know...That's my biggest worry though, is that people will forget I am this big manly rugby player...That's like my identity.

The active process of adhering to masculine behaviours and attributes reflects the concept that masculinity is performative and that a man's behaviours can both be a result of, and a contributor to, his identity (Butler, 1988; Rutherford, 1992). For example, Sean further alluded to his performative masculinity and the masculine "tag" he maintained through still training and building muscle;

I kind of like getting that [masculine] "tag" because people, I thought in my head, people would think like "he is injured but he is still training"..."bloody hell he needs to stop and he just doesn't give up"...It wasn't like, I wouldn't have said it was just like an image, I would have said it was more like a, you know it's just who I am.

Similarly, Jack discussed how continuing to train allowed him to preserve his ability to work hard and compete with other men;

[by still training you are] wanting to make sure you still work hard enough to keep up with the other [bigger, more muscular] guys... Like yeah definitely it [training through injury] definitely shows you're competitive

The reliance on building muscle as a way of projecting the desired masculine attributes appeared to be shaped by the same initial observations and social interactions that informed their overarching masculine performance narratives. Identifying key lived experiences and observations could help understand the potential associations made between a muscular physique and masculinity and how they may inform men's masculinities and their response to identity threats. For example, Sean recalled the

prominence of his dad's physical size, but also the typically hegemonic attributes his dad possessed and how this influenced his identity and attitudes towards pain;

I always looked at my dad and always thought he was always like bigger than everybody else's dad... Like he was big, but he was just like a proper man you know... he had this "never say die" attitude... I remember just feeling his [dads] chest and feeling the scars [after heart surgery]... he went through all that pain just to be with us... And I always just thought, like I want to be thought of like that... this is where my work ethic came from I think. I wanted to put myself through pain [referring weight training and rugby] to prove I could take it.

The social environments of the gym and sport also influenced these men's reliance narrative and their decisions to continue training. In the current men's descriptions of the gym, their peers' attitudes appeared to reinforce weight training and a muscular physique as part of a masculine performance, which marginalised rehabilitation, as Jack discussed;

when you're injured they [gym peers] constantly criticise your physique... like "oh, look at his arms, you been training in the ladies [female only gym room]?"... that would definitely piss me off a lot more because you [peers] don't need to point out the fact that they [arms] look small [lacking muscle] when I can't do anything about it with rehab... it does make me train harder though, want to prove them wrong a bit I guess... [I couldn't] just do the little sh\*tty [rehabilitative] exercises... I couldn't stop [normal weight] training... I didn't like to see my body getting smaller, I wasn't going to let being injured stop me training [normally with weights].

Jack's narrative demonstrated the potential stigmatisation associated with accepting injury (Young et al., 1994). The potential for stigmatisation appears to encourage men to rely on and adhere to socially acceptable masculine responses (Young et al., 1994), which in the current individuals was to reject pain and the injury and continue with weight training. Sport and associated training regimes, such as weight training, involve a toleration and

denial of pain, which the current men's sporting environment also appeared to support (Maguire, 1993; Spencer, 2012). These social messages appeared to encourage a reliance on a narrow view of masculinity that supported the rejection of injury and acceptance of pain, as described by Sean;

I always feel like the physios do a really good job but they're kind of like, "right come on, are you just going to like just get over this now and start playing again?... everybody thinks that you're lying or you're soft or you're looking for the excuse.

Similarly, Malcom captured the masculine expectations in his sport and how this prevented him from accepting it and displaying his pain;

I felt like I was going to cry. And I thought f\*\*\*ing. Don't do that. I felt sick, I thought I'd broke my ankle actually at the time. Er, yeah I do remember thinking I am surrounded by a pitch full of guys here, yeah bear the pain, bear the pain. Walk off, walk off, walk off. You know I was in agony. So yeah definitely some kind of masculinity... Yeah I'd rather just do it [carry on with training] and hope that it gets better and quickly and no-one the wiser or knows and I manage to keep training... I'd have definitely yeah I'd have lost some man points [if he'd stopped training].

In a sporting context, tolerating pain is also a way of impressing coaches and establishing kudos, prestige, and respect from teammates (Young et al., 1994, White, et al., 1995). The social interactions and these cultural attitudes of not seeking help and enduring pain that permeated the gym and the men's sporting fields did not embrace alternative ways of aligning with the men's overarching masculine performance narrative when injured (e.g., rehabilitating). The strict, narrow, adherence to weight training and visual muscularity as a way of "doing" masculinity shaped the restricted reliance narrative the men constructed in response to their injuries. Specifically, the "normal" attitudes, values, and beliefs within the men's social environments and interactions reinforced muscularity's value as symbols of their hegemonic attributes, which appeared to shape their reliance narrative.



The reliance narrative demonstrates a typically masculine response, such as the suppression of pain, stoicism, and not seeking help (Cheng, 1999; Courtenay, 2000; O'Brien et al., 2005; Young et al., 1994). These findings suggest that some men through their lived experiences and social interactions may adopt a restricted, narrow, masculine performance, which could encourage potentially detrimental or harmful behaviours (e.g., training through injury) when faced with identity conflicts or threats. Specifically, the reinforced value of a muscularity as a “tool for success” may encourage men to “abuse” themselves, such as overlooking pain and injury with the aim of maintaining a sense of masculine pride, success, and identity (Dowling Næss, 2001; Young & White, 2000).

**The redemption narrative.** Two individuals constructed a redemption realignment narrative in response to their injuries. The redemption genre originated from McAdams and McClean (2013) who proposed that individuals may shape their narratives in a way that allows opportunities for positive outcomes from initially negative events. The plotline of the redemption narrative was similar to the progressive narratives proposed by Gergen and Gergen (1986; bad to good). In the current 2 men they saw the injury as a negative event but engaged in adaptive behaviours to turn their situation into a positive experience and outcome. The specific plotline for the redemption narrative was *acceptance*, *adaptation*, and *restoration*.

Like the reliance narratives, injury threatened the men's muscular masculine capital, which endangered their overall masculine performance. Unlike the reliance narratives, however, these men described their loss of muscularity in the past tense, which suggested a realisation and acceptance that it had happened. Andy described this recognised loss of muscle through his injury and its effects on his sense of self;

Lost a lot of size...Muscle mass decreased quite a lot...You train so hard to make yourself have a physical presence and to be a big strong man...[going from that] to being sat down doing nothing and just sat there feeling, you know helpless, and

nothing you can do...[I was] going down that road of feeling depressed, because I just wanted to get back in the gym and just wanted to get back on with my training. Traditionally, accepting injury, removing oneself from the normal social environment, and seeking help poses a risk of being stigmatised as less masculine, or a “pussy” (Young et al., 1994 p. 181). Within the redemption narrative, however, these men could accept the initially negative experience of injury, as Dennis described; “It was just bad luck, it just, it happened and I had to sort of accept it, I just wanted to focus on getting better”. This acceptance appeared to be justified because they viewed rehabilitation as a positive adaptive behaviour that still allowed them to work on functional elements of their muscularity (e.g., strength), which for these two men was reinforced as a valued form of masculine capital. Also, by committing to rehabilitation, working on regaining strength, and actively addressing injury allowed these men to maintain a performance of their desired masculine attributes, such as strength, control, and determination. For example, Andy stated;

I never saw it [rehabilitation] as a negative thing...[through rehabilitation] I could build on what I'd lost [muscular function] to start with...[rehab allowed me] to just get functional movements back again...get everything [his muscles] firing back up again...after I felt really good and felt more strong...I could regain control [of my body].

The adaptations within the redemption narrative were similar to the features of a quest narrative in that both men focused on controlling the present, met their injuries head on, and sought alternative ways (e.g., rehabilitation) to redeem their functional muscularity and continue to project their desired masculine performance (Frank, 1995; Smith & Sparkes 2005). For example, Dennis discussed how his approach to training shifted to accommodate rehabilitation, which still met his desire to project the masculine attributes, such as hard work and challenging himself;

I concentrated on doing the [rehab] exercises properly, doing them regularly and that sort of then became training. So I knew then that by doing the exercises and doing them regularly it would help the muscles get stronger and get better so I'd be able to get back to normal... The way I was training more shifted than, and sort of changed to a different style but yeah, I could still work just as hard, but it [training] was different... I think with most sort of training... it's [rehab] kind of like a challenge to get better at it and get sort of stronger at that particular exercise... I like doing, like challenging myself... if you are going to do any sort of physical exercise or anything... even rehab I think you have to be able to, you've got to have that little bit of drive to be able to push yourself that little bit further 'cause otherwise you just won't progress.

The ability to construct a redemption narrative appeared to be facilitated by a compatibility between the men's early masculine habitus (e.g., their observations of male role models; Bourdieu, 1986a) and their social environment and interactions. For example, both men's initial observations of masculinity were focused on masculine and bodily function rather than a visual image alone, as Andy described; "he [dad] is not big. But yeah... he grafts... it [the body] has got to be functional... you've got to work [hard]". He also explained how through rehabilitation he adopted the "don't lay down and die attitude [that] he [his dad] had" and that "working at rehab and getting my strength back shows that I have got some graft in me."

The men's sport and gym environments approached the injury rehabilitation process in a way that embraced similar messages of functionality, hard work, challenge, and determination that the men had observed and valued. Specifically, the encouragement of goals and targets associated with regaining muscular function, gave the men a focus, something to aim and work hard for, and a sense of achievement, which were important attributes associated with the men's muscular masculine identities. Athletes often learn to normalise pain and injury as part of the sporting experience (White et al., 1995), but as

previous shown in the reliance narrative not all athletes will respond with acceptance of injury. Where the redemption narrative differed was that the current 2 men's social fields also normalised rehabilitation. Framing rehabilitation as a normal, alternative, and temporary practice that could restore their normal muscular function and continue to project desired masculine attributes, which aligned with features of the men's overarching masculine performance narratives. The supportive social environment allowed the men to commit to the redemption narrative; accept their injuries, fully adapt their behaviours (to rehabilitation), and restore their masculine performances;

You know you learn that it's [injury] part of the game...I was in the right atmosphere. I had the right physio for me...They knew I just wanted to get my strength back, get back to functioning properly...I'd set myself, with my physio, some targets and some goals and I knew I had something to aim for, something to work hard for... we set targets...I had something to aim for which made me think "oh I have done that"... "I've managed to perform a deadlift. I've managed to squat"... You know and I felt much better, more like myself.

The redemption narrative suggests that some men will construct a quest-like plot, one that allows them to meet an identity-threat (such as injury) head on and adapt their behaviours in a way that aligns with, and restores, their dominant identity performance. Such a narrative reflects a positive, less restrictive, and more flexible response to masculine identity threats. Specifically, the redemption response demonstrated elements of inclusive or hybrid masculinity, which allowed the current men to reject traditional features of a hegemonic masculine identity (e.g., a denial of pain and injury) and remove themselves from normal practices whilst still maintaining their sense of masculinity (Anderson, 2005; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

**The relapse narrative.** Two men demonstrated *relapse* narratives which appeared to represent a fluctuation in responses; from a "redemption-based" to a "reliance-based" narrative. This relapse plot shared elements of a contamination narrative, which is

characterised by the disruption of a potentially positive event by negative experiences or affect (MacAdams & McLean, 2013). For the current men, their relapse narratives presented an initial appreciation of, and engagement in rehabilitation, which suggested some acceptance of injury and a positive response. This initial response, however, became overwhelmed by negative social interactions and emasculation. This interference stimulated unfavourable emotions, contaminated their initial narrative trajectory, and altered their attitudes and behaviours to suit their cultural surroundings. The fluctuation in their realignment of their masculinity suggested a narrative instability, which was notably influenced by the social environment. The plotline for the relapse narratives followed a pattern of *appreciation, disruption, and reversion*.

Once again muscularity was at the forefront of the men's concerns about the threat injury posed to their masculine performances. As with the previous participants, the potential loss of muscularity appeared to reflect a reduction in the current 2 men's masculine performances. Existing research suggests that retirement from sport creates a shift in female athletes' bodies from a muscular athletic ideal, which appeared to stimulate both positive perceptions and increased body dissatisfaction (Papathomas, Petrie, & Plateau, 2018). The positive perceptions were fuelled by a perceived compliance with "normal" more slender feminine ideals, and the dissatisfaction arose from an increased body fat and reduced muscle mass, which shifted their bodies away from both the athletic and feminine ideals (Papathomas et al., 2018). The current men's narratives suggested that injury may stimulate a similar shift away from an ideal muscular physique and threaten a man's masculine identity, as Dale described;

Like couple of days, or a couple of weeks without training you start... You feel like you're going to lose your size [muscularity]...when you lose that muscle, you've got nothing to show for it [masculinity], because the muscle mass is pay off for all the hard work that you do [in the gym]...It's a fear, yeah fear of losing... Because

you're losing size, people might lose a little bit of respect for you because you've weakened, or you've shown weakness....

Similarly, Darren referred to how the potential loss of size through injury impacted his sense of identity and status as a masculine rugby player;

If you don't do it for a couple of weeks you really notice a difference don't you, you lose your size and strength. It is this that makes me a rugby player, it's what I need to perform and compete...without your size and strength it is hard to compete, you feel like your status has gone.

Like those in the redemption narrative, Dale and Darren initially engaged in rehabilitation. Their perceptions, however, were less of an overall acceptance of the injury and rather than focusing on controlling the present and seeing rehabilitation as an alternative and valuable way of projecting masculinity, the relapse narrative focused on the future and more appreciated that rehabilitation could get their normal masculinity back. Darren demonstrated this future focus; "I think it's [engaging in rehabilitation] just purely wanting to get back playing as quick as possible...Try and gain that masculinity back, stuff you haven't been able to do for a few months [e.g., normal weight training]." Dale also alluded to the perception that rehabilitation would prevent any further losses through his injury;

Just kept rehabbing it so to try get back into it [weight training] as quick as poss.

But I didn't not want to do it [rehabilitation] properly and then f\*\*\* it up even more for later...I wanted to get back training as quick as possible so I didn't lose any more.

Despite an initial engagement in rehabilitation, Dale and Darren both expressed a premature return to their normal activities. The both expressed a need to "try and cut corners" (Darren) and revert back to normal weight training as way of realigning with their masculine performances. Dale reflected;

I think I left it [rested the injury], 2 days without doing any-, no 3 days...then started doing band stuff [rehabilitation exercises]...but I just couldn't leave it

[weight training]... The weights take over...I end up having to try find a way around it [rehabilitation]. Erm, I probably rush back [to training] or try and block it out or, yeah pain killers, or whatever to try and work around it to keep going [with training]. So yeah. It almost, yeah, fuelling that, almost masculine identity...this big, lean, masculine look.

The men's decision to stop rehabilitation and prematurely return to weight training appeared to be guided by the social interactions within the gym, which seemed to both reinforce weight training as an acceptable behaviour and expose the men to emasculating exchanges. These interactions generated a disruption to their realignment narrative and initiated some self-evaluation causing the men to question their masculinity and identity status, as Darren alluded to;

You see everyone doing what they're able to do normally and your kind of lying down on a mat doing, feels like nothing really. Yeah you just feel like you're, you've gone back to the bottom of the pile you can't do anything... You don't want to be just constantly stretching on a mat. Beggsy seen me on a mat last year, I think those about three or four weeks solidly. He would come in there and I would just be laid down on a mat. He would come over, you are not doing anything again. Are you having a nap? So it's Beggs' fault, pushing me to get off the mat and get back doing stuff [weight training] again.

Similarly, Darren shares the specific emasculating effect of his gym peers that reinforced continuing weight training as a symbolic representation of masculinity (e.g., "sucking it up"; Fenton & Pitter, 2010; Howe, 2001; Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Yeah they're [gym peers] they're chirping in your ear, and [when] they're about then you are less likely to do it [rehabilitation]. And do it properly... like when you're in the gym or, and you're feeling a little a niggle and you happen to mention your injury. The lads'll take the piss... Or [you say] I think I've hurt something and got a niggle. They'll just [say] "oh take some man up pills and get on with it. Stop

being a pussy. Just deal with it and get on with it”. And it’s another man thing as well, you don’t moan about it or show weakness, you just suck it up and get on with it don’t you... You just deal with it and get on with it [normal training]. [You] man up [and] take some man up pills.

Alongside the gym interactions, and like the redemption and reliance narratives, the men’s life-histories suggested that perceptions of male role models may also have helped shape the stoic traditional attitudes that characterised their masculinity (e.g., not showing weakness). These masculine attitudes appeared to be transferred into the men’s masculine performances and guided their responses to the threat of injury, as Dale reflected on;

Me dad wasn’t a gym goer, but he was a big guy...a big man’s man...me dad never stopped. He was always at work, start early, finish late, get home, get on with jobs at home. He didn’t stop, he didn’t stop working, he didn’t show weakness. You know me dad never complained. Never saw me old man cry or owt like that...if something happened you just dealt with it...so for me, even now it’s about just constant working, never rest...like if you injured you try deal with it [rehabilitate] and just power through [continue training]...you know its probably not good [referring to stopping rehabilitation], but you can’t just stop [engaging in his normal activities].

The disruptions these men experienced led them to revert back to their default behaviours and realign with their masculine performances in the way they had been reinforced by their social environments and interactions, which was to return to weight training as a way of demonstrating a strong stoic man.

The relapse response clearly demonstrated the power social interactions and cultural “pulls” have in changing the course of individuals’ narratives. The way the current men were unable to commit to a temporarily altered masculine performance (e.g., rehabilitation) and reverted back to default behaviours (e.g., weight training) suggested an overwhelming sense of conflict between personal beliefs and social image. For example,



the current men held a view that rehabilitation was a valuable activity in getting them back to normality, but this was conflicted and overpowered by their social environment's emphasis and endorsement of a traditionally masculine performance (symbolised by weight training).

### **Conclusions**

The current findings suggested that some men's muscular desires are specifically driven by a masculine-biased performance narrative that aimed to create a coherent sense of masculine self that could navigate several social contexts. A global masculine performance narrative appeared to subsequently guide realignment narratives that addressed any threats to the men's muscular masculinity, such as injury. Muscularity and the act of building it became a fundamental resource that provided various symbolic meanings within the current men's masculinity-focused narratives, such as a functional muscular physique that represented a hard-working, capable, and determined man. The current findings contribute to the existing literature in the following ways.

Firstly, the proposal of masculine performance narratives as a contextual backdrop for men's muscular desires is a novel finding that advances our understanding of the muscle-masculinity relationship. Performance narratives are useful in sharing the significant pressure some individuals are under to monitor and control various aspects of their lives and achieve success (e.g., sport and academia; Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). The masculine performance narrative in the current study suggests that men put themselves under pressure to comply with socially shaped masculinities and use muscularity as a vehicle to achieve this.

Performance narratives have been predominantly discussed in sporting contexts and used to frame dedications to athletic identities (Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009). Some researchers have also identified performance narratives in the realm of eating disorders, whereby individuals view self-starvation as a means of accomplishment when sporting and academic contexts may not allow for success (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). The

performance narrative has yet to be demonstrated in the existing muscularity and masculinity literature. The current findings, however, propose that a masculinity-infused performance narrative may be useful in understanding men's muscular desires. Cox and Thompson (2000, p. 6) stated that "to understand the body we need to understand the discourses within which the body is constructed and operates". The current findings contribute more than just a discourse and propose a global masculine performance narrative as an "blueprint" that shares the identity origins of men's muscular desires and the way a muscular masculinity and associated performance underpins some men's life choices.

Secondly, the current study suggests that men may construct realignment narratives in response to threats to an overarching performance narrative and their masculine identities. Existing research has suggested counter-narratives as providing alternative ways of being and rejecting dominant narratives, which gives a sense of definitiveness (Baldwin, 2005; Bamberg, 2004; Carless, 2008). The current study, however, suggests that rather than findings alternate ways of being, some men may seek temporary ways of storying their experiences as a way of reconvening with their dominant performance narrative. The proposal of these realignment narratives may add to existing body image research and provide an interpretive viewpoint for individuals' decisions to engage in unhealthy or risky behaviours (e.g., self-starvation, excessive exercise) as ways of maintaining their narrative identities (e.g., as successful athletes; Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke 2012; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012).

The realignment narratives were informed by, and dependent, on different social contexts and the interactions, norms, and expectations within them, which suggests that the way individuals choose to story their experiences may be malleable and interchangeable. Narratives provide resources to structure selfhood and identity and facilitate the construction, revision, and reconstruction of identities in different social contexts (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This narrative function means that interchangeability

would be crucial in offering individuals with a range of templates they need to reconfigure their identities in different social contexts. Although interchangeability was not directly explored in the current study, the shift expressed in the relapse narrative suggests that the current narratives could be adapted and altered depending on the social field pressures and the identity goals of the individual. Future studies can build on the current findings and explore how individuals story their muscular desires and identity performances in multiple social contexts that expose them to varying interactions and expectations.

Thirdly, the current study demonstrates the role of muscularity as a form of cultural or masculine capital (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013) within the men's performance and realignment narratives. Muscularity as a form of masculine capital is not novel and is already documented in the literature (de Visser et al., 2009; Edwards et al., 2017). Within the current narratives, however, muscularity seemed to be more than just a superficial resource, or one of many options, to supplement a masculine image or compensate for feminine or marginalised behaviours (Anderson, 2002; de Visser et al., 2009; Gough, 2013). Developing a muscular physique, in the current men, played a central, primary, and symbolic role in their masculine performances, rather than a compensatory resource that made up for a lack of other masculine attributes (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013). Additionally, the current findings may advance the perspective of muscularity as masculine capital and suggest that it is not simply the possession of muscle that is important, but the act of developing it is also a symbolic resource for enacting masculinity, which helps provide more of a contextual understanding of some individuals' excessive and obsessive relationship with lifting weights (e.g., Murray et al., 2011, 2012).

Finally, the apparent importance of social interactions and life-course observations in the construction of the men's narratives supports the concept that masculinity and associated capital (e.g., muscularity) may be context dependent and that multiple masculinities may be at the work in modern society (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser &

McDonnell, 2013; Gough, 2013). Gendered identities and traits are not simply imported into social fields, but instead are subject to interactional processes that inform attitudes and practices (Dellinger, 2004; Klein, 1993). Similarly, the current study identified various perceptions of ideal male attributes (e.g., stature, pain suppression, and hard work), variations in the socially shaped muscular projects (e.g., appearance or function), and diverse realignment narratives, which were influenced by the men's social interactions. These findings reflect Bourdieu's (1986a) proposal that an individual's habitus (e.g., masculine attitudes) and capital (e.g., muscular emphasis; appearance or function) can become reinforced and validated within a specific field (e.g., sport and the gym), which guides acceptable practices (e.g., weight training). These current findings embrace the influence of social context and suggest broader and more diverse narratives associated with muscular masculinity, rather than imposing traditionally hegemonic storylines and focal points, which appears to dominate the literature (e.g., a focus on stature and an exertion of power over women; Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993). The current findings may inform future research of the potential value in exploring different sociocultural fields and the personal stories of those who inhabit them. Such research could expand on existing, often narrow, assumptions about muscularity and masculinity that focus on bodybuilding subcultures and visual muscularity (Brown, 1999; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Sparkes et al., 2005).

The following chapter expands on the current life-history study and presents an ethnography that explores the different subcultures of the gym and the social processes and interactions that may shape the potentially varied meanings associated with muscularity. Exploring the different subcultures and weight training individuals further helped identify and understand the identity-related contexts that may motivate individuals to develop their socially meaningful muscular physiques.

**Table 2**

Chosen qualitative research credibility criteria and actions taken in the life history study.

Aim	Criteria	Action
Contribute to the understanding of social life.	Substantive contribution	Identified the novel relationship between muscularity, masculinity, and injury, and applied an in-depth, rich, narrative approach to explore this area which is lacking in the current literature.
To have an emotional and intellectual impact on readers.	Impact	Present an understanding of the lives of the participants; stimulating readers' emotions and generating new questions.
To present comprehensive evidence for interpretations.	Width	Provided sufficient quotations, and story extracts to support the theoretical interpretations. Made models data etc. publicly available.
To create a complete and meaningful picture for readers.	Coherence	Created a structured, flowing, and informed representation of events; building narrative plots intertwined with theory.
To leave a lasting impression on readers.	Resonance	Presented experiences and emotions that translated into the lives of readers; stimulating sympathetic and empathetic emotions.
Represent the experiences of the participants.	Credibility	Sought participant reflection and using the already established relationship with, and understanding of, the participants.
To gain critical feedback and employ a transparent research process.	Transparency	Peer reflections and debriefing, and scrutiny from individuals outside of the research team was gained. For example, other therapists, and an English language expert reviewed the study to offer critical feedback, suggestions, and ideas on the credibility, utility, potential benefits, and flow.

## **Chapter Six: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Meanings of Muscularity within the Weight Lifting Culture**

The life-history study shared the construction of a masculine performance narrative and 3 realignment narratives that framed muscular desires and the different ways the participants drew on their muscularity in response to potential identity threats. The presence of the different, socially constructed, muscular projects (e.g., appearance and function) and various symbolic connotations (e.g., hard work, stoicism, and status) associated with the men's muscular desires and identities inspired the current ethnography. Specifically, the apparent influence of the gym and its social interactions on the shaping of muscular meanings and contexts, and its role as a social arena for accruing masculine capital and constructing identities stimulated the exploration of the weight training cultures.

The discussion of masculine-biased identities within the previous study (and existing literature), however, may not reflect other individuals or identities that engage in the gym and weightlifting. Masculinity may not be the only basis to a person's identity, and individuals may have multiple identities depending upon the social context and requirements (Côté, 1996, 2016). For example, not all weightlifters' identities may be governed by masculinity (e.g., women). Building on the previous life-history study, the current chapter sought to explore the diverse (sub)cultural environments of the gym, understand the shaping of the different contexts for muscular desires, and gain insight into muscularity's potential role in multiple identities. A wider understanding of muscularity's role in identity generally, and a deeper insight into the influence of the various muscular subcultures is unclear in existing literature and requires further exploration. Conducting the current study could embrace the diversity in contextual muscular meanings and the versatility of muscularity across multiple identities and social contexts. Embracing diversity and versatility could help reduce the overgeneralisation often seen with current concepts (e.g., DFM) and stereotypical assumptions (e.g., vanity or hypermasculinity)

about individuals who invest in muscle building behaviours. In turn, broadening the perspective of muscular desires could inform both future research and applied professionals of the importance in understanding individuals' personal experiences, motives, and meanings associated with their muscularity.

### Introduction

Our bodies are common sources of concern driven by the advice of health experts and our own experiences of aging, illness, and health. As well as the physical function of our bodies, there is a frequent judgement of our physical appearance (Maguire, 2002). Prompts from the media, interpersonal pressures, and social comparisons appear to influence one's perceived appearance (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Leit, Gray, & Pope, 2002; Morrison et al., 2003; Shomaker & Furman, 2010). In response to bodily concerns and the pressures to achieve an ideal appearance, individuals commonly turn to physical activity. The engagement in exercise, such as weight training, and going to the gym provides individuals with the means to construct attractive, fit, and healthy-looking bodies and secure improvements in body performances (Abbott & Barber, 2010; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Monaghan, 2001; Stewart et al., 2013). The investment in our bodies appears to make us *look* and *feel* good which reflects a common motive for engaging in gym work (Maguire, 2002; Monaghan, 2001; Stewart et al., 2013).

One aspect of appearance that is rising in popularity in contemporary literature is muscularity (McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Pope et al., 2000a). Specific muscle building behaviours, such as exercise and weight training, correlate with a desire to be more muscular (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Litt & Dodge, 2008; Smolak & Stein, 2010; Tod & Edwards, 2015). Similarly, boys engaging in gym activities, and those with a higher commitment to weights-based exercise, do appear to report higher desires for muscularity (Hale, Roth, DeLong, & Briggs, 2010; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). One concern is that males with muscular desires may become obsessed with building muscle and dependent on exercise, which can have a significant impact on daily life and social and psychological

functioning (Edwards et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2011, 2012; Pope et al., 1997, 2000; Tod & Edwards, 2015). As well as exercise, other potentially disordered or harmful muscle-related behaviours, such as nutritional supplementation, dietary manipulation to gain weight, and substance abuse correlate with muscular desires (Edwards et al., 2014; Pope et al., 2000; Tod & Edwards, 2015). The potential for muscularity concerns and desires to encourage harmful and risky behaviours informs the need to understand the underlying “drivers” of an individual’s quest to be more muscular.

An existing quantitative, positivist, focus in the existing muscle literature lacks insight into the meanings assigned to muscularity, the role they play individuals’ lives and identities, and how these meanings and roles may differ depending on the individuals and their social environments and context. To capture these meanings and the stories that frame the interplay between the social environment, muscular desires, and identity, research could benefit from more in-depth qualitative research designs (Tod et al., 2016).

Ethnography is one method that could offer a prolonged qualitative insight into the potential cultural role the gym plays in addressing and shaping different individuals’ muscular desires and meanings. By observing the gym culture and the muscular projects, interactions, and narratives it houses, we can begin to understand why some individuals may develop and maintain their muscular desires, why they engage in associated behaviours (e.g., weight training), and what impact their desires and behaviours have on the wider context of their lives and identities.

Many existing ethnographies focus on the global gym culture and explore the motives for engaging in general exercise and physical activities (Crossley, 2006, Doğan, 2015; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Stewart et al., 2013). A range of motives are reported in the existing qualitative literature, such as general health, guilt, escapism, and social interaction (Crossley, 2006; Doğan, 2015; Stewart et al., 2013). The existing ethnographic studies provide us with some insight into the concept of body projects, whereby individuals work on and tend to their bodies not only for superficial reasons, but also as a means of



self-expression, to bear symbolic value, and maintain a coherent sense of identity

(Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 2013). The existing literature suggests 2 key “drivers” of body projects and gym work; appearance and performance enhancement (Abbott & Barber, 2010; Stewart et al., 2013). These “drivers” appear to be related to conforming to body ideals (e.g., thin and muscular) and constructing attractive, productive, and resilient bodies (Stewart et al., 2013, p. 545). Improving bodily and muscular appearances and performances through gym work seems to provide improvements to features of the self, such as increased self-esteem, control, confidence, psychological resilience, and lowered anxieties (Crossley, 2006; Doğan, 2015; Fox, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Klaine, 1993; Shilling, 2013; Stewart et al., 2013). The link between gym training, body projects, and “the self” informs the value of further exploring the identity-related meanings held by gym users to understand their muscle-focused desires and behaviours.

Despite an increasing focus in the gym as a social environment and arena of activity where individuals can transform their bodies and accomplish it as part of an individual identity, an in-depth qualitative focus on muscle-specific gym cultures is relatively limited. Some existing ethnographies that explore the weight training culture use identity to frame individuals’ muscular desires (Andreasson, 2014; Andrews et al., 2005; Atkinson, 2007; Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993). The existent identity focus within existing muscle research, however, appears to be on specific subcultural and gendered identities (e.g., bodybuilding and masculinity respectively; Beagan & Sanders, 2005; Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993). The existing qualitative muscle research offers some insight into the socialisation within the bodybuilding subcultures and the identity-related connotations associated with a muscular physique (Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). For example, the bodybuilding subculture appears to house social interactions that provides a progressive acculturation and internalisation of specific values, routines, and practices, which help individuals learn and construct their own body projects and collective training identities, which helps shape

their place in the world of the gym (Andreasson, 2014; Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Monaghan, 1999). Achieving a large, lean, and muscular physique appears to unify bodybuilders (Monaghan, 1999; Phoenix, 2015), which may suggest that a desire for muscularity may be fuelled by aspirations to “belong” to a specific subcultural group and construct a specific identity (Coquet et al., 2016; Phoenix, 2015).

Additionally, bodybuilding also appears to assign specific male connotations to a hypermuscular physique, such as power, dominance, and self-assurance, suggesting that investing in a muscular body project may also be a statement of hypermasculinity and help construct a coherent masculine identity (Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Fox, 1998; Klein, 1993, 1995; Monaghan, 1999). The symbolic value of the body and muscularity as social projects and sites of communication, self-improvement, and impression management (Brown, 1999; Giddens, 1991; Maguire, 2008; Shilling, 2013), has led some researchers to interpret the body as a source of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986b, 1990). As mentioned in chapter 2, other researchers have framed the body and muscularity in several forms of embodied capital, such as bodily (Wacquant, 1995), physical (Shilling, 2013), gendered (Bridges, 2009), and masculine (de Visser et al., 2009). Despite the variations in their context, building these forms of capital appears to help enhance one’s social worth, status, distinction, and identities within a given context (Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Hughes, 2000; Klein, 1993; Phoenix, 2015). Specifically, in the bodybuilding community possessing more muscle allows men to embody their masculine identities, providing them with an increased confidence, success, and superiority (Bridges, 2009; Jefferson, 1998; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 2002; Phoenix, 2015).

Within the “mixing pot” of weight training gyms, however, there’s an assortment of people building, observing, comparing, and displaying varying degrees of (muscular) size, strength, and functionality (Monaghan, 1999). The interactions and experiences individuals face in these weight training subcultures appear to project specific attitudes and values (e.g., habitus, Bourdieu, 1986a, 1990) allow for a personal development of preference

(e.g., taste; Bourdieu, 1986a) and a contextualisation of their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1990; Monaghan, 1999). The diversity of weight training subcultures and the individuals who engage in them may suggest that the different muscular projects (e.g., developing strength) people invest in may represent an accruelement of cultural capital that helps shape various subcultural gym identities.

Exploring the gym's inner workings and social interactions could help us understand how and why individuals come to develop specific subcultural preferences, embody certain muscular projects, and invest so much in building muscular physiques. The bodybuilding subculture does appear to provide narrative resources, such as values, knowledge, language, and activities, that allow people to story, enact, and embody their muscular desires and ideals in a socially acceptable way (Andreasson, 2014; Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993). Despite the potential for different socially shaped muscular projects and identity constructions, the existing muscle literature seldom stretches far from the subculture of bodybuilding (Andreasson, 2014; Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993). Focusing on one subculture of weight training may not capture the different muscular meanings and stories of other weight training individuals (e.g., powerlifters or recreational lifters). Similarly, the focus on masculinity provides only one feature of identity and may restrict our understanding of women and other individuals not governed by a traditional masculine identity, but who still choose to engage in weight lifting and muscle building behaviours.

Given the potential for body projects, such as developing a muscular physique, to provide general self-empowerment and a secure sense of who one is and what one wants to be, muscularity may be a more versatile resource that is transferable across multiple identities (e.g., an occupational identity; Coquet et al., 2016; Orbach, 2009; Stewart et al., 2013). By exploring the weight training culture through a non-specific subcultural lens and generating a more expansive view of those who engage in the gym, the current ethnographic study could provide a broader insight into the social processes and identity-

related meanings that shape and frame muscular desires and muscle building activities. In doing so the current study could inform a reduction in overgeneralised assumptions about weight training individuals and their muscular desires. Understanding the varied projects and underlying meanings associated with developing a muscular physique may guide avenues of support for a range of weight training individuals from different subcultures and social backgrounds who may display concerns with their muscularity.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the weight training subcultures of 2 separate gyms. Specifically, I aimed to a) explore the socially constructed projects and meanings associated to muscularity in different weight training subcultures and b) understand muscularity's potential role as a form of capital in weight training individuals' multiple identities. By adopting an "inside" perspective into the weight training environment and its social processes, I could achieve both these aims. If we can understand how and why muscularity becomes important to different individuals, we can begin to comprehend why people may invest so much in increasing muscle, and the impact it has on the wider context of their lives.

## **Methodology**

### **Ethnographic context**

To explore the socially and culturally constructed meanings of muscularity and its role in the lives of weight training individuals, the current study conducted an ethnography. Ethnographic studies seek to gain an insider's interpretation of the everyday life and practices in specific social environments, along with the meanings and construction of said practices (Hoey, 2014). Conducting an ethnography allowed me to explore the complexity of the weight training culture (and subcultures) and understand the interactions within them. Specifically, I conducted participant observations, which involved direct contact with the members of weight training culture, such as the various trainers, coaches, and staff. My observations provided an opportunity to witness weight training in the gym

environment and the wider-context of people's lives over a prolonged period (Smith & Caddick, 2012).

Existing ethnographies help to identify and understand the interactions and processes within the gym culture, with the aim of gaining insight into the experiences of weight training and the muscular desires within its culture (Andrews et al., 2005; Crossley, 2006; Klein, 1993). Existent gym ethnographies (e.g., Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993) helped rationalise the current ethnography by demonstrating the significance of the gym as a social field where individuals are exposed to various processes and influences that shape and contribute to an individual's identity and behavioural practices. The lack of breadth in the exploration of weight training subcultures and the multiple identities within the gym, however, inspired the current study to take a wider approach and explore the diverse social groups that make up the weight training culture. In doing so, I could demonstrate the potentially different muscular projects and the broader identity-related meanings assigned to muscularity that may guide these individuals' desires.

### **Method**

Prior to plunging myself into the sometimes intimidating weight training culture, I approached the owners of 2 gyms, Cast Iron and Revival (pseudonyms), where I discussed the use of both sites as part of the research project. After gaining ethical approval from the University research ethics committee the owners received a copy of the study information sheet and signed a gatekeeper consent form. At both gyms, the owners had a good rapport with the members and often trained in amongst them, which encouraged regular interaction. The relationship between the owners and the members helped create an awareness of my presence and role within the gym, as well as the study aims and procedure. Posters placed on notice boards in the changing rooms and around the gym also aided the awareness of the study and my presence. When training and walking around the

gym I also made a significant personal effort to spread awareness to all members and those who asked about my role or the project.

Over the course of 16 months I employed an ethnographic, participant observation, approach to exploring 2 gyms and their weight training subcultures. Both were independently owned gyms in separate West Yorkshire towns. One, referred to as Cast Iron, housed established powerlifting and strong man training subcultures. The second site, Revival, was branded as a health club and had a broader agenda, accommodating recreational physique trainers, athletes, and both competitive and non-competitive bodybuilding subcultures. Over both sites there were approximately 150 and 350 yearly members respectively, all able to choose from a range of membership rates from £20.75 to £29.75 per month, along with a large number of pay-as-you-go users. Men predominantly used Cast Iron, with a small number of women inhabiting the gym floor, but the majority of female trainers would be seen passing through on their way to the upstairs gym classes. Revival demonstrated a more balanced demographic regarding sex, with women intermingling the men in the weights areas of the gym despite having an exclusive ladies-only area. Through my interactions in both gyms I observed individuals from different social backgrounds and professions. These included teachers (e.g., primary, secondary, and higher education), office workers (e.g., administrators and information technology experts), health professionals (e.g., osteopaths and general practitioners), various athletes (e.g., rugby union and soccer), and manual labourers (e.g., builders and plasterers).

### **Participant Observations**

The observations of the various members focused on those who displayed an obvious interest in muscularity and training with weights. To determine their interest, I observed those who regularly trained with weights on 3 or more days of the week, validated their muscular interest through conversations and behaviours (e.g., discussing and evaluating their own or others' physiques), and frequently used legal dietary supplementation. Throughout my time at both sites I regularly observed over 50

individuals, all engaging in their routine gym activities. Adopting a participant-observer role meant I could look-on and interact with the participants whilst also engaging in my own training. This allowed me to become immersed in the culture and build a rapport with the members through shared experiences. Observations were made 3 to 4 days per week and consisted of 4 to 12 hours per week spread between 7am and 9pm Monday to Sunday capturing a broad sample and spectrum of observations. A field note journal, in the form of a training diary, contained records of significant on-site notes, such as observations of daily training routines, conversations, behaviours, and interactions. Noting brief observations in a training diary meant that individuals did not feel under pressure or intimidated by my presence because recording training details in a personal log was a common behaviour within these cultures. A second journal documented a description the day's observations and ideas in a more temporal and structured fashion on a computer away from the gym. The second journal also included reflective notes on my part in the activities and interpretations of the observations, as well as theoretical notes linking the observations to relevant theory and literature. Each week of observations ranged between 1 and 5 A4 typed pages of field notes, which reduced as the study progressed due to theoretical saturation and produced a total 167 pages for analysis.

Alongside the observations, I carried out formal audio-recorded interviews with 11 individuals. Initially, I was only looking to explore the men within the gym, but the increasing number of women engaging in weight training activities broadened the scope of the study to both sexes. Of the 11 interviewees, 3 were women and 8 were men. Despite this skewed distribution, it was a proportionate representation of the weight training culture I was in, with the majority of those in the weight training areas being male. The men were aged between 19 and 40-years-old, and the women between 28 and 49 years. Table 3 presents the demographic information and number of interviews with each participant. Each interviewed ranged from 30 to 90 minutes, which yielded approximately 16 hours of formal interview data.

I invited individuals for interviews at a time and place of their choice where they provided informed consent. The interview settings varied with some taking place in the quiet staff rooms at both gyms, in a quiet corner of Cast Iron next to the reception desk, or in Revival's open coffee lounge. Additionally, some participants would email me extra thoughts that arose from our meetings. The formal interviews were semi-structured, with the aim of eliciting rich narratives around the individuals' experiences of, and within, the weight training culture. Each interview covered a range of topics that were theoretically informed and driven by my observations and the participants' experiences. Specific topics developed, such as training motives and activities, interactions in the gym, and the participants' own beliefs and bodily self-perceptions. During the interviews, I took an active-listener approach to allow the content to emerge naturally and minimise any researcher dominance, which also aided the flow of the interview. The more my presence was known around the 2 sites, the more I developed relationships with the participants and the more insightful and comprehensive the interviews became; revealing more personal and rich narratives.

During my time immersed within the gym cultures I also conducted many informal interviews, which were often initiated through passing conversations during training sessions, at the reception desks, or whilst spotting another member (supporting someone during a specific exercise for safety). These informal interviews would often begin with a general statement. For example, showing an interest in one another person's training plans for the session or inquiring about each other's progress. The conversations would then take a route directed by the member, who would sometimes show interest in the research and empathise with the snippets of my findings, and other times they'd simply want to discuss their own experiences with training.

Several participants demonstrated wider contextual meanings for their muscularity, which led me to more closely interact with these individuals both inside and outside the gym environment. The more personal interactions resulted in meetings at coffee shops,



social events, and the individuals' houses and work places. In doing so I could better understand muscularity's role in their lives and identities beyond the gym.

### **Data Analysis**

The current study initially used thematic analysis to examine the field note content and comprehend the themes in the global interactions, experiences, and activities of the weight training culture. As the ethnography developed, I also analysed the specific stories of 11 individuals I focused on in both gyms. Focusing on participants' personal stories informed my use of a thematic narrative analysis. Using thematic narrative analysis, I could identify and interpret the central patterns and themes in the content of the individuals' personal stories that provided meaning to their muscularity within the weight training culture and their multiple identities.

**Hybrid thematic analysis.** Specifically, I adopted a hybrid approach to the current thematic analyses, whereby I drew on both inductive and deductive methods (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Using a hybrid approach allowed an interaction between the data and theoretical conceptual frameworks. This two-way interaction allowed me to capture the naturalistic content of the participants experiences and activities, whilst also providing some underpinning theoretical contextualisation, which helped guide the interpretation of the data.

Rather than collecting all the data and then conducting my analyses, I continually immersed myself in the vast collection of ongoing observations, field notes, and interview transcripts and simultaneously interpreted the data throughout the collection process. This process encouraged an iterative and concurrent data collection and analysis, which meant my data could shape the ongoing observations, interviews, and associated interpretations and theoretical reading. The observations and transcripts I collected were read and re-read to sensitise myself to, and immerse myself in, the data. Whilst writing up and reading the data I made analytical notes and interpretations using an inductive approach. These notes consisted of semantic, first order, codes, which represented the direct content, surface

meanings, and literal comments within the data (e.g., “it improves that self-esteem”) and helped describe my observations and participant interactions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016).

From this data-driven analysis, the interpretations and codes directed me towards underlying theoretical frameworks and relevant literature (e.g., ICM; Cote, 2016). These frameworks guided my reading and aided the understanding of the data regarding the gym environment and participant experiences, but it also encouraged me to revisit my data and stimulated further, deductive, code generation. This deductive analysis produced additional latent codes that were suggestive of underlying themes (e.g., identity) that shaped the participants’ responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016).

When analysing all the first order codes, similar codes were categorised into second order codes, and overarching themes and patterns. For example, mentions of significant others, such as coaches (as a first order code), were classified as cultural heroes (second order codes), which eventually fed into a theme of “sociocultural shaping” and a central theme of identity construction. The iterative and combined approach to thematic analysis identified central themes and patterns in the data; on both an explicit and interpretational level (Boyatzis, 1998; Robertson et al., 2013). The emergent themes helped create a picture of the different weight training subcultures and the social experiences, interactions, and activities of their members. Given the thesis research focus on individual meaning, social construction, and the assumption of multiple realities the analysis also focused on the personal narratives expressed by the participants in the weight training subcultures I observed. This individual-focus directed additional thematic narrative analyses.

**Thematic narrative analysis.** First, I carried out the process of narrative indwelling, where immersed myself in the participants’ stories; reading them several times, listening to the audio recordings, and making initial notes of the content. This process encouraged me to think with the stories. Second, a thematic approach, similar to the previous hybrid approach, was applied to the interview transcripts, which consisted of

identifying key words, phrases, and sentences within the transcripts that inductively

captured the thematic content of the participants stories. Additionally, I noted descriptions of the underlying meanings associated with the participants' muscularity (e.g., identity capital), which consisted of deductively drawing on theoretical ideas (e.g., ICM; Côté, 2016) to inform my interpretations. The key features and meanings I noted helped inform the common themes that underpinned the individuals' narratives. The difference in narrative thematic analysis is that rather than analysing across large data sets or cases, I focused on the personal accounts and specific stories that the participants constructed to make sense of their own experiences (Smith, 2016). To aid the narrative analysis I asked key questions of the data; what are the participants' reasons for building muscularity, what role does their muscularity and desires play in their story, what are the threads that ties the story together, and what do the individuals achieve by framing their muscular desires in this way?

The various content (e.g., meanings, thoughts, beliefs, and actions) that emerged in the participants' stories allowed me to identify 3 narrative themes (internalist, compensator, and promoter). Using a thematic narrative analysis helped inform the understanding of how the participants made sense of their desire for a muscular physique, the different identity-related meanings associated with their muscularity, and the way the various uses of their muscularity within their narrative benefited their sense of self and identities (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

### **Research Credibility**

The qualitative world of research is a sea of concepts and criteria for credibility and "goodness" with several scholars offering varied and important insights into best practices (Tracy, 2010). The often relativist and subjectivist viewpoints of qualitative researchers, such as the current thesis, rejects the notion of strict credibility criterion, and suggest that interactions between researchers and the researched co-construct knowledge rather than it just being "out there" (Smith, 1989). Without some guidance or commonality between

research approaches, however, it is hard to distinguish a “good” study from a “bad” one (Smith & Caddick, 2012, p.70). The current study design was guided by several criteria proposed by Smith and Caddick (2012) and Tracy (2010) that provides qualitative researchers the tools to judge their own and others work. The specific criterion reflected the aims of the current study, which were to understand the socially constructed meanings of muscularity in the weight training culture and muscle’s impact on, and role in, individuals’ broader lives and identities.

The evaluative criteria also ensured that the research design and procedures appropriately captured and represented the complex and diverse cultures of the current gyms, and the subjective experiences of the participants within them. The chosen criteria also helped justify the worthiness of the study and assert the proposed contributions to research. Given the subjectivity of the current study, by ensuring I met the criteria, such as transparency, rich rigour, and resonance, meant readers could construe my involvement and interpretations of the data. Table 4 presents the chosen criteria and clarifies the actions taken to address them.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The findings are presented in two sections that reflect the different levels of analysis conducted in the current study. Firstly, I present the different muscular projects observed in the various weight training subcultures. Additionally, I present the sociocultural features and processes (e.g., gym geography and cultural heroes) that shaped these muscular projects and engrained their value into the participants’ subcultural training identities. Secondly, I discuss the wider context for muscularity as a source of identity capital and present the different narrative themes the participants drew upon to make sense of their muscular desires, articulate what muscularity means to them, and draw on muscularity as tool to master and perform their desired identities.

### Interpretation and Discussion

The current findings suggest that there are various body projects within the weight training subcultures that contextualise the muscular meanings around various appearance and/or performance-related values. These body-focused contexts for muscularity appeared to be attributed to, and instilled in, the construction of collective subcultural gym identities. The preferential context for the current participants' body projects and muscular desires appeared to be shaped by the physical geography of the gym, the sociocultural interactions within it, and the practices they endorsed. Additionally, the socially shaped body projects appeared to be integrated into different training identities (e.g., powerlifter or bodybuilder). My initial observations captured the superficial "gym-related" meanings for the individuals' muscular desires, but muscularity's role appeared to span beyond physical body-focused enhancements and social gym identities.

The learned value of muscularity (appearance and performance-focused) within the current weight training subcultures appeared to be transferrable across the participants' other identities outside the gym. The participants expressed an overarching identity performance narrative that guided their muscular desires, with a muscular physique facilitating the successful enactment of multiple identities. Within this overarching narrative, 3 themes became apparent (*Internalist*, *Promoter*, and *Compensator*) that framed the specific meanings of muscularity and its use as a versatile resource (i.e., identity capital; Côté, 1996, 2016) to achieve successful identity performances. These findings suggest that some people's muscular desires may be grounded in broader identity-meanings and represent strategies to invest in oneself and maintain a stable and successful life trajectory (Coquet et al., 2016; Côté, 2016).

### Subcultural Body Projects: Constructing Gym Identities

The current ethnography delved into the "multicultural" fabric of weight training gyms. The current observations suggested that the term weight trainer cannot be interpreted as a singular entity or incorrectly assumed to share the same values as

bodybuilding, but instead we need to appreciate the potential diversity in the way muscular body projects are contextualised within different weight training subcultures. Specifically, the current findings refer to 2 prominent subcultural body projects; performance and appearance enhancement (Stewart et al., 2013). These subcultural body projects underpinned the muscular contexts and meanings of the subcultural identities observed in the current study; strong men and powerlifters (performance-focused) and bodybuilders and physique trainers (appearance-focused).

The subcultures focused on muscular performance (e.g., strong men and powerlifters) contextualised their muscularity around strength, power, and function. It was the development of this strength, power, and functionality within these individuals' body projects that was valued by their subcultures, a symbolic element of their collective identities, and respected by other subcultural members, as Jake described;

In strong man if you can lift a f\*\*\*ing heavy weight well done to you...if you can lift 150 kilos above your head everybody [in strong man] is going to be like f\*\*\*ing hell... Even if you can personally do more you are still going to be impressed because you know how hard that is...it [working towards being stronger] creates a little family. (Jake, Cast Iron)

The appearance-focused subcultures (e.g., bodybuilders) commonly expressed desires for muscle bulk, leanness, and bodily proportions, which also appeared to be a shared bodily focus for their subcultural identities, as Thor (bodybuilder and gym owner) explained;

I have no real desire to be massively strong in the gym...My focus is 100% on that body composition change...[I] consider training for muscle growth...that's a common goal of the bodybuilding fraternity...that's what everyone shoots for...it's an underlying foundation of why I am training I suppose. (Thor, Revival)

Like the current findings, existing research suggests that the gym is made up of various trainers that hold different perspectives of the perfect muscular body (Monaghan, 1999, 2001). Despite an awareness of the potential variation in muscular perceptions, the existent

research focus still tends to remain on the bodybuilding subculture and desires for visual muscularity (Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999, 2001, 2002). The current study offers some insight into the different body projects present in the different realms of weight training and informs a need to further explore these subcultures.

The current participants' muscularity projects and subcultural identities were not preconceived, but instead the gyms and the subcultures they housed shaped their muscular preferences. Like suggestions in the existing literature, the 2 current gyms were not simply containers for muscle building activities but were socially active arenas where individuals could interact and negotiate with other gym personalities (Andrews et al., 2005). These interactions allowed individuals to learn from others, form their own muscular preferences, and commit to a subcultural training group and muscular project that provides them with a sense of collective identity inside the gym (Coquet et al., 2016; Monaghan, 1999).

Bourdieu's (1986a, 1986b, 1990) concepts of habitus, taste, social fields, and cultural capital helped frame the influential role of the current gyms' subcultural environments in shaping the current individuals' muscular preferences and identities. Like Bourdieu's proposal of social fields, both current gyms appeared to be domains of activity that projected and endorsed specific subcultural norms, attitudes, and values (e.g., habitus; Bourdieu, 1986a, 1990). Being exposed to the habitus of both gyms informed the participants' gravitation towards a specific subculture and muscular project, which reflects the concept of taste and conforming to social preferences (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1990). Conforming to the social preferences within their gyms, the current individuals learned to value and develop their muscular appearances and/or performances as forms of cultural capital, which allowed them to construct and distinguish their subcultural identities (Bourdieu, 1986b, 1990). Existing research suggests that the physical layout and social interactions within gyms can shape an individual's muscular preferences, and the training agendas, language, and attire they adopt (Brown, 1999; Coquet et al., 2016; Hilgers & Mangez, 2015; Shilling, 2013). The interpretation of the current gyms as social fields that

endorsed specific habitus, shaped their members muscular tastes, and directed practices

towards developing and projecting appropriate cultural capital stemmed from observations of the physical geography, subcultural interactions, and members' practices.

**Gym geography.** The first encounter of the physical gym environments appeared to have an influential effect on individuals' attraction to specific muscular body projects and training identities. Members discussed their first experiences at the 2 sites and described that "there is something about this place" (Jake, Cast Iron) and "it [the bodybuilding gym] grabs hold of you and takes over" (Lee, Revival). The "hold" the members described suggested the gyms, as physical spaces, played an influential role in their muscular socialisation.

My first observations of both gyms demonstrated how the structured layout and geography of each site could instantly reflect and advertise predominant subcultural values (e.g., habitus), impose their muscular preferences (e.g., tastes) onto the members, and provide a cultural resource for social distinction (Bourdieu, 1986a). For example, Cast Iron indulged in all things "heavy"; the equipment, coated in cold steel and weathered gun-metal-grey paint, flaked rust onto the hands of those who tackled them. I inhaled the macho and intimidating aura of this setting. It was clear from the onset that this was a place for challenging the limits of strength, pushing boundaries, and surpassing the "norms" of human functional ability, as demonstrated by the following field notes:

My foot is barely over the entrance threshold to Cast Iron and I am hit with the sight of steel plates, the smell of sweat and perspiration (old and new) perfuming the air, and the deafening 'clang' of iron and grunting efforts harmonising over the backbeat of Guns and Roses' Live and Let Die. The claustrophobic deep red walls squeeze in on you, and the high, narrow, windows allow just enough light in for me to do a quick sweeping glance of the room, but at the same time protect the members from the outside world and maintain the secrets of their personal haven.



My eyes slowly slide from left to right, revealing the clear passion for everything weights related. The industrial sized squat racks, bench press, and lifting platforms dominate the gym, all overlooked by one lonely mirror, and cemented together with trees of cast iron weight plates and barbells.

The whole span of the gym is watched over by the reception desk placed conveniently at the entrance, offering its tenants the powders and clothing they need to blend into this environment and exceed their physical limits. Even the clock above the desk is in the shape of a weight plate and is surrounded by a hoard of powerlifting trophies and certificates glorifying the hall of famers and the legacy of this gym. (Field notes, Cast Iron)

The second site, Revival, was a physical contrast to the latter. It was branded as a health club, and provided a much lighter, mellowed, and aesthetically pleasing atmosphere.

Unlike Cast Iron, this gym less aggressively teased out its inner workings and gradually exposed me to a brighter, cleaner, and more polished arena than Cast Iron. The clear-cut training space created by the tidiness of the gym floor and the sharp edges formed by the circumference of weights machines could be interpreted as a message of shape and symmetry. On closer inspection, more about this environment reinforced a cultural message of image and the visual physique. These messages were represented by the stretch of mirrors that absorbed the whole training floor, the tanning room that saw a constant stream of varnished and sculpted bodies enter and remerge, and the endless array of posters of half-naked, noticeably muscular, men and women all endorsing various physique enhancing products (e.g., protein powders and fat-burners etc.). The following field notes describe my initial introduction to Revival;

I climb the pearl-coloured ceramic stairs and see the slow emergence of a glass double door rise from the horizon of the final step, where I am blinded by a blast of natural light and bright white walls edged with an aqua blue trim. As I fully enter, I am greeted by a reception desk housed with shelves full of nutritional

supplementation, a very large smiling man filled with enthusiastic welcomes, the echo of cheesy pop music, and a distinct lack of the ‘clang’ of metal plates hitting the floor. I take the walk along the freshly carpeted path to the hub of the gym, and immediately feel the light airiness that contrasts the darkened red walls of Cast Iron. I get a more virile and less intimidating feeling from this gym. The weight training area slowly teases into vision, fully observed by a long stretch of mirrors, and cleverly framed by the resistance machines. The rubberised training floor is awash with a variety of equipment; interspersed with benches, two squat racks, collections of clean-cut black rubber weight plates all neatly stacked together, and a long rack of organised dumbbells that heads up the bottom of the room.

Here there is a distinct lack of stale sweat making its way up my nostrils, and instead I am drawn to the humming of the air conditioning unit blasting cold, fresh, and perfumed air into the room, and the smell of fresh coffee leaking from the quaint lounge leading off reception. The fresh, bright, and clearly defined appearance of this gym alludes to a more image-focused subcultural preference in this establishment. (Field notes, Revival)

The gyms were not merely passive arenas or shells for people to congregate and lift weights. Instead, the physical layout of the gym became a meaningful space and source of information for individuals to discover who and how they want to be (Andreasson, 2014; Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016). Through the gym the individuals could construct different subcultural muscular projects and meanings (e.g., aesthetics and function), and distinctive training identities (e.g., bodybuilders; Andreasson, 2014; Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016). The sectorisation of gym space, as seen in the current observations, appears to correspond to specific weight training practices and influence a distinction amongst training subcultures (Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016). The spatial and symbolic structure of the gym appears to contribute to the learning process, impose cultural norms, and help organise individuals’ muscular perceptions and

stories (Andrews et al., 2005; Andreasson, 2014; Coquet et al., 2016). Such findings

suggest that training subcultures and the physical gyms that house them are “co-dependent and co-produced” and may be an influential hub of socialisation that provides the cultural narrative resources for individuals to construct their muscular body projects and gym identities (Andrews et al., 2005, p.888; Coquet et al., 2016).

Specifically, the gyms appeared to be physical billboards for the messages of performance and appearance-focused muscularity and provided a progressive acculturation of social norms, which facilitated the construction of subcultural tastes, training communities, and identities (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1990; Coquet et al., 2016). Alongside the physical geography and structural layout of the gym, sharing bodily knowledge, preferences, and practices between members also appeared to mould and reinforce different subcultural training values, norms, and attitudes into the members identities (Andreasson, 2014; Andrews et al., 2005).

**Subcultural heroes.** Some researchers suggest that “founders” or “entrepreneurs” of specific cultural environments, generate symbolic features, such as rituals, languages, and beliefs (Pettigrew, 1979). Organisations and cultures appear to be characterised by the sharing of these symbolic features, which helps specify the associated roles, values, norms, and expectations (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984). Like the suggestion of cultural founders and entrepreneurs (Pettigrew, 1979), the current study demonstrated the presence of heroes that reinforced the muscular projects, values, and meanings of the different subcultures. The cultural heroes in the current study disseminated the subcultural habitus within their respective gyms (Bourdieu, 1986a, 1990); delivering mixed messages of performance-focused muscle (e.g., strength and power), and muscular aesthetics (e.g., size and leanness). The cultural heroes came in the form of coaches, gym owners, and other successful trainers. For example, Frank (strong man coach), epitomised the functional meaning attributed to the muscular projects within performance subcultures of Cast Iron (e.g., strong men and powerlifters). He magnetised the attention of its members, provided a

point of reference, and reinforced the functional values, rituals, and language expected of the subcultural members. Jake discussed the influence Frank had upon his transition into the strong man culture and his muscular perceptions:

He [Frank] was very different to all the personal trainers I had ever met...He was this huge man, but not your standard pretty boy big. What impressed me was just how strong he was...He could actually back it up and say you should do this, and it obviously worked as he could show you [through his strength]...His [strong man] background [and success] was so extensive it actually like registered in me what he was saying...I started realising why they [strong men] do what they do and it [how] it all fits in, [so] I got sort of addicted to that way of training because I saw the results and you saw yourself getting stronger. (Jake, Cast Iron)

Frank's interaction as a cultural hero was very direct, he would physically and verbally guide those around him towards a meaningful outlook on muscularity that revolved around performance and functional goals of strength and power. Frank explicitly shaped the functional muscular habitus that underpinned the strong man subculture their muscular projects, conditioning members to view their muscular bodies as "working as a unit, like a machine". The muscular performance habitus was also engrained into the members subcultural identities by Frank. He reinforced the valuable cultural capital (e.g., muscular strength) and practices (e.g., functional lifts) required to achieve subcultural distinction;

I briefly mentioned it last week, but for those who weren't here, we need to think about our training outside of these sessions. We need to justify everything, every exercise, what order we do them in, how many reps, sets. This isn't bodybuilding, everything you do must transfer over to your lifts. You need to be the biggest, but strongest, most powerful version of yourself...we are not looking to shape, what we do here, and in our training, must carry over to our primary lifts...we need to focus on shifting the weight...and moving the bar (Frank, strong man class, Cast Iron)

Revival also demonstrated cultural heroes that promoted the muscular habitus, capital, and practices associated with its predominant appearance subcultures (e.g., recreational physique trainers and bodybuilders). Revival's key hero was the gym owner and bodybuilder (Thor) who had earned his heroic status through his visual muscularity, which reflected the concept and importance of a muscular physique as embodied cultural capital within the weight training gym (Bourdieu, 1986b; Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993). For example, Thor was the face of Revival, everyone knew who he was, and their discussions of him would illuminate and focus on his physique, as they perspired nothing but admiration and desire to look like him. His physique was a walking advert for visual perfection and muscular aesthetics; immaculately shaped, with abs that protruded through his vest, and a leanness that allowed you to observe every fibre and furrow of his golden tanned body. Unlike Frank's hands-on direct role, however, Thor discussed the indirect effect he had as a cultural hero within this subculture:

No one is going to gather round all the guys in here who are trying to train for their physique. Like I wouldn't jump out here and say right then lads, gather round, what we doing today?...[but] I suppose they look [at me] and they think I wouldn't mind looking like that at some point myself, so you are setting that example I suppose.  
(Thor, Revival)

The indirect and visual guidance provided by the Thor reflected the appearance meanings assigned to the body projects of the subcultures at Revival, and placed emphasis on a muscular "looking" body. His physique as a form of embodied cultural capital gained him his heroic status and became the vehicle for shaping other members' muscular values:

It is what people see me doing [bodybuilding] and I guess [it is] what they then want to get into so they can achieve similar results... Without blowing my own, they do take notice and want to copy me. You can see it, they come and ask me for my training plan. I don't mind sharing I am not precious. It's nice to get people involved in it [bodybuilding and physique training]. (Thor, Revival)

Existing bodybuilding literature shows a hierarchical structure that is often visible in weight-training gyms and may reflect the current suggestion of cultural heroes and those with superior capital (Andrews et al., 2005; Klein, 1986, 1993). Many researchers suggest that the relationships between established and non-established trainers can be hostile and the sharing of knowledge and experience can often be hoarded (Andrews et al., 2005; Klein, 1993). The current study, however, demonstrated less of a competitive and domineering representation of the hierarchies in the weight training subcultures. Instead the interactions between the cultural heroes and the less established or novice members in the different subcultures reflected more positive, educational, and guiding relationships.

The cultural heroes at both sites appeared to shape an ethnophysiological appreciation of the habitus, capital, and practices that reflected specific muscular body projects and informed the construction of distinctive subcultural training identities (Manning & Fabrega, 1973; Monaghan, 1999). Similarly, existing research suggests that interaction with, and observations of, “knowledgeable persons” provides technical and symbolic guidance for novice lifters and an opportunity to learn the subcultural norms, values, and practices (Andreasson, 2014; Coquet et al., 2016). By disseminating the subcultural values, the current subcultural heroes helped shape the members’ contextualisation of muscularity and offered reference points and blueprints for the enactment of their developing subcultural identities. These identity performances consisted of acceptable subcultural practices that the participants learned within the gym, such as specific training rituals, language, and attire.

**Subcultural practices.** The practices endorsed by the subcultural heroes consisted of various training rituals, specific dialect, and clothing choices that represented the learned muscular values and meanings. As described in existing research, the gym can be awash with different “types” of lifter all engaging in different exercise activities, sporting distinctive attire, and drawing on subculturally recognised vocabulary (Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). These distinctive subcultural practices, in the current study, provided

the individuals with means to tend to their bodies and enhance their muscular appearances or performances as appropriate cultural capital, which facilitated the construction and enactment of their collective training identities (e.g., powerlifters and bodybuilders).

***Training rituals.*** The performance-focused muscular projects of the strong men and powerlifters were reflected in the behavioural investment in muscular strength, the body as a machine, and a functional relationship between body and barbell. These individuals had no clear primary desire for the aesthetic development, which was reflected in the performance and technical focus evident in their training practices. For example, the powerlifters' and strong men's training sessions appeared to be broken down into "lifts" (e.g., "deadlift day") or movement patterns (e.g., "pull days") with an emphasis on the target weights or repetitions for the day, as Mike, a powerlifter at Cast Iron, described;

Like in my deadlift I noticed that I was sticking at the top 2 or 3 inches so I had to put a lot of my focus into rack pulls, mid back tightness things along those lines. It's technical in a different way to bodybuilding. It's like a bodybuilder will know what [muscle] they have to train, and they will train to get it bigger through small focused exercises. I know what movement I have to train in order to make sure my lift is better, my lift is cleaner. So, we [powerlifters] focus on big movements or parts of movements that incorporate lots of muscles rather than picking out mirror muscles.

The strong men and powerlifters gave an insight into these performance-focused rituals that provided the foundation for their training; "The main goal is can, am I increasing my weight [lifted]...it's like how can I get that movement stronger...rather than get your f\*\*\*ing muscles out" (Jake, Cast Iron). I frequently witnessed these performance-focused training practices at Cast Iron;

Jake (strong man) and Annie (powerlifter) both take turns to heave a fully loaded barbell through a deadlift off the specially built wooden platform. Puffing their cheeks, veins bulging from their necks, with a slow rise of red that fills their faces

like a thermometer, they drop the bars with a deafening “thud” as the rubber discs bounce off the laminated wood in a cloud of chalk. The straining barbell and their tightly shut eyes ignore their struggling reflections in the mirror, and they focus on nothing, but moving the barbell from floor to hip, emphasising their investment in strength. (Field notes, Cast Iron)

The dominant subcultures (e.g., bodybuilders and recreational physique trainers) at Revival presented a different training focus, which reflected the symbolic value of visual muscularity that characterised their body projects and gym identities. For example, Thor described how the bodybuilding subculture perceived their physiques as “clay models” and training was like “moulding the body... looking for this perfect symmetry and proportions”. This appearance-focus appeared to epitomise the training ethos at Revival and emphasise the value of visual muscularity as a source of cultural capital. Building visual muscularity in the appearance subcultures involved much finer detail, isolating individual muscle groups and body parts. Instead of training sessions being defined by an aspect of performance (e.g., power or maximum strength), bodybuilders attribute their training sessions to specific body parts or muscle groups, such as chest or leg day, (Klein, 1993). I observed the strict focus on fine detail and isolating muscle groups in the bodybuilders and physique trainers at Revival;

A young lad quietly walks up to the mirror with his dumbbells in hand. He presses himself intimately close and carefully observes every shortening contraction of his biceps as he curls the dumbbells up to his shoulder. With each rhythmical pump of his arms he follows his movements with glances from bicep to mirror and mirror to bicep. After every set, he turns to face himself and throws his arms high, fists towards his ears, tenses up his biceps and puts just as much effort into this pose as the exercise itself. He begins to analyse them from every possible angle as he twists and turns to manipulate and catch the light and illuminate his now quivering biceps bulging from his arms. (Field notes, Revival)



A recreational bodybuilder, Jay expressed the visual focus and the artistic, sometimes vain, perspective for the appearance culture's training practices and how the resultant muscularity bolstered their identities;

Why do I do it? I do like to look bigger and I like looking in the mirror and seeing my physique come on...it's a bit vain...I like the attention it brings me. People know me by my physique, they know what I am about...[In training] I'd be like okay [I need a] lower body fat percentage or maybe my traps need more work or my shoulders need to be rounder. Like I will always like be able to pick something and be like okay that needs more work, this needs more shape, this needs to be bigger... that's just how my mind works in terms of training...the weights are the tools to shape these things, so I would do more reps here or add an extra exercise to isolate the chest here or whatever it was I need...it's all about fine details, it's quite creative.

Within the bodybuilding subculture, the mirror seems to be “third party to each workout”, which reflects the appearance-focus that underpins their muscular projects (Klein, 1993, p. 42). Unlike the powerlifters and strong men, the bodybuilding and physique subcultures appear to give up the notion of muscular function in their training and just focus on achieving the “look” of physical prowess (Klein, 1993). There is little research that delves into the fine details of the different subcultural training regimes. It seems that there may be a risk of making generalised assumptions that all weight training represents the same thing – building muscle. The current findings, however, suggest that the different training rituals in the subcultures may be a symbolic representation of the various identities within weight training gyms and the muscular projects, values, and meanings that underpin these social images.

The current participants also conformed to subculture-specific dialect and attire, which supplemented the training rituals and practices, and achieved subcultural distinction.

Specifically, the language and clothing appeared to provide an opportunity for capital

evaluation and exhibition, and a resource for constructing desired training identities.

***Subcultural dialect and attire.*** The dialect within the strong man and powerlifting subcultures at Cast Iron ran parallel with the performance-focused habitus; expressing the members desires, behaviours, and goals in practical and mechanical terms. For example, I questioned Shaun (a competitive powerlifter) on the pile of papers he was flicking through, to which he enthusiastically talked me through each detailed phase of his training year. He pointed out each colour coded “tapering”, “peaking”, and “de-load” sessions, all meticulously structured and formatted with his “big lifts” broken down into “phases of movement” (e.g., drive, pull, or transition phases). Highlighted in bold at the top of each page, and repeated to me, were the goals of each phase; “here is where I want to be maxing out...and here is all about power and moving the bar quickly!”

In contrast, at Revival I would often overhear conversations or exchanges that expressed more artistic and visually descriptive vocabulary. The bodybuilders and physique trainers would discuss vascularity, symmetry, and proportions. Wayne, a young amateur bodybuilder would regularly approach the mirror near where I was training, he would proceed to tense a part of his impressive physique and direct at me; “Look at the striations!”. Vocabulary, such as “striations”, was very visual and referred to the aesthetic leanness of muscularity and the physical state of one’s appearance. Thor also drew on the visual references when describing stand-out members of Revival; “You should have seen the rig on him...you have never seen a physique like it...he was so ripped, literally shredded.”. The current individuals’ choice of language appeared to demonstrate the investment in visual muscularity that their surrounding culture and interactions at Revival engulfed them in and stamped on their subcultural identities.

The existent research on bodybuilding also demonstrates the specific dialect that permeates this training group, which echoes the bodybuilding vocabulary shown in current findings (e.g., “muscle striations”, “symmetry”, and “vascularity”; Klein, 1993; Monaghan,

1999). Due to this focus on bodybuilding, however, there is little insight into the subcultural dialect of other training subcultures. The current findings suggest that the specific dialect is “indigenous” and meaningful to its subcultural members, but often foreign or unheeded to “out-groups” (Aoki, 1996; Monaghan’s, 1999, p. 274). The meaningfulness of this dialect is an additional resource that individuals can draw on to demonstrate their association with specific muscular bodies, unify those with similar goals, and create a distinction from other subcultural identities.

The choice of attire was also associated with the participants’ muscular projects and a further reflection of the subcultural habitus. The performance subcultures would generally be clad in baggy, non-revealing, sweatpants, t-shirts or hoodies. Some literature suggests a link between appearance anxiety, SPA, and muscular concerns, and used to interpret an individual’s choice of physique concealing clothing, such as baggy or long-sleeved clothing (Edwards et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2011; Pope et al., 1997, 2000a). Similarly, the decision to wear baggy clothing has been associated with hiding one’s physique as protection from the negative perceptions of others about one’s bodily capital (Edmonds, 2018). The current performance subcultures, however, did not express physique-related anxieties, but instead suggested their clothing choice reflected a focus on comfort and function endorsed by their social fields. For example, Mike stated; “Well one thing is I can squat to depth in trackies... It’s more of a mobility thing.” By wearing “functional” clothing these individuals could achieve optimal muscular performances, which allowed them to develop and demonstrate their cultural capital - strength. Jake explained;

I hate wearing tight fit stuff where you feel confined...I much prefer to wear baggy t-shirts...If you have got a tight top on and you are trying to get down [into a squat] and it stretches, it just catches too much. It’s more, it is a function thing. But I personally just like wearing baggy stuff. I hate wearing tight fit stuff where you feel confined. (Jake, Cast Iron)

The more revealing dress codes displayed by the members of Revival's predominant subcultures allowed them to make a visual statement of their identities as bodybuilders and physique trainers. Jay (bodybuilder at Revival) described how the clothes he wore allowed him to advertise his cultural capital; "there is a sort of mental block about wearing something baggy...it wouldn't show anything off... I just feel like, I'd rather have them [his muscular arms] on show than sort of squirrelled away like in a top." I observed the appeal of wearing muscle-revealing clothing at Revival, which echoed the idea of showing off one's capital;

Wayne [amateur bodybuilder] advances out of the changing rooms wearing a vest draped low exposing the canyon of his chest and pectorals. The theme of exposure continues into his miniscule shorts, barely protecting his modesty, and allowing the whole gym to marvel at his impressive quadriceps that formed a network of hollows under his skin. When I question him on his lack of clothing, he explains to me; "I like wearing vests and shorts so I can look at my muscles being worked when I train, and also because I like to see how I'm looking in the mirror, you know the pump, I guess a lot of it is vanity really I do it partly to show off." (Field notes, Revival)

Some general gym research suggests that people's choice of clothing is a strategy to display superior physical capital (Frew & McGillivray, 2005). This reflects some of the observations in the current study, suggesting some individuals reveal their physiques to "show off". Although, the performance subcultures were not revealing their physiques, their choice of clothing allowed them to successfully demonstrate their strength, which suggested the same desire to successfully display their cultural capital as a way of establishing and distinguishing their subcultural identities.

The physical geographies and subcultural heroes, rituals, dialect, and attire appeared to represent a social construction of the muscular projects, habitus, and cultural capital that helped create a sense of community and exclusive social identities (Andreasson, 2014; Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Monaghan,

1999). Existing ethnographic studies appear to agree that weight training subcultures (e.g., bodybuilding) take hold of their devotees, creates a sense of community, and endorses an adherence to subcultural norms (Brown, 1999; Coquet et al., 2016; Monaghan, 1999). The adherence to subcultural norms is met by members through “what they wear, what they believe, and the way they act” (Klein, 1993, p. 30). The direct sociocultural influence observed in the current study suggests that there are many social factors to consider when exploring an individual’s development of muscular desires. Such findings question the apparent focus on, and demonization, of the media in existing muscularity literature (Cafri, et al., 2006; Cramblitt & Pritchard, 2013; Giles & Close, 2008; Morrison et al., 2003)

Identifying the different subcultural processes that reinforce specific muscular projects within specific training identities offers insight into the potential meanings behind an investment in the weight training culture. The current study aimed to expand on the understanding of people’s desire to be more muscular and explore the potentially deeper identity-related meanings attributed to muscularity and the impact it has in the wider context of people’s lives outside of the gym and in their multiple identities, which is the focus for the following section.

### **Global Identity Performance; Muscularity’s Versatility**

The gyms’ influence on the current participants appeared to span beyond shaping “in-house” commitments to muscular projects and constructions of subcultural training identities. The engagement in weight training and developing a strong muscular physique seemed to instil a sense of mastery over the participants’ global sense of self. For example, the gym was described by Jake as “a sanctuary...a place where you can take ownership of yourself.” The broader meaning of control associated with weight training and the socially constructed muscular projects transferred into the broader lives of the current individuals, as Annie explained;

It’s not just you come into the gym and do your weight training and then you forget about it again...it’s a control thing I suppose [and] staying in control [of

yourself]...It's about becoming stronger as a person as well, not just being strong in the gym...you apply it in all areas of your life.

The current findings propose that muscularity, and the quest for it, may represent a broader resource – identity capital – that became part of a global identity performance narrative. Specifically, muscularity (e.g., aesthetics or function) seemed to be a tangible resource that helped achieve a coherent sense of self in multiple and ever changing social contexts (Côté, 2016), as Mike described; “it [being strong and muscular] makes you feel more secure in yourself and about what you are doing [generally].”

Developing both performance-related and visual muscularity seemed to become engrained into the current participants' general sense of self and their overarching identity performance narratives, as Annie described; “if I look in the mirror and I look strong, to me it makes me feel strong...I feel so much more assured in myself [generally].” Similarly, Jason expressed a similar positive influence of his visually muscular physique; “if you look good, you feel good, and if you feel good you do good.”

Additionally, engaging in muscular body projects and developing tangible identity capital, in the current study, appeared to also stimulate specific psychological, emotional, and personality-related elements, such as an enhanced self-esteem, confidence, psychological coping, and self-assurance. For example, strength and visual muscularity were reported to “fill that self-esteem...give that confidence” (Annie, Cast Iron) and provide “personal satisfaction...that sort of removed insecurities” (Jake, Cast Iron). Similarly, existing research suggests that engaging in gym training allows individuals to secure “psychological capital”, such as self-esteem, which enhances individuals' general well-being, health, and sense of self (Stewart et al., 2013). The current findings, however, propose that the ICM provides a more universal way of interpreting the range of psychological effects of the gym and body work. Existing identity literature refers to the concept of intangible capital, which reflects an individual's personality characteristics, cognitive abilities, and capabilities to negotiate various obstacles, environments, and

contexts (Côté, 2016; Côté & Levine, 2002; Kroger, 2007). The concept of intangible capital allows us to frame a range of resources that include the more behavioural coping capabilities, such as navigating challenging social environments or experiences, which could potentially be overlooked by the term “psychological capital”.

Having a “bank” of tangible and intangible identity capital provides individuals with the capabilities to negotiate uncertainty and unpredictability, which contributes to coherent identities in an ever-changing society (Côté, 1996, 2016; Côté & Levine, 2002, 2016; Kroger, 2007). Leanne indicated this interaction between muscularity and both her psychological traits and behavioural capabilities, which enhanced her sense of self, resilience, and identity adaptation;

This [weight training] had a positive effect on me, building my confidence, gradually improving week by week, proving to myself that I could push myself further and further...It has showed me I can achieve things I didn't think I would be able to do... Feeling physically stronger has given me more drive and energy... I am now a totally different person. The effects of that “different person” who has new found confidence, energy, determination and drive made me rethink a number of areas of my life which I hadn't previously had the courage to face. (Leanne, Revival)

The positive interaction between muscularity as tangible identity capital and the range of other resources (intangible identity capital) may fuel individuals’ investment in weight training and developing a muscular physique. By developing and drawing on both forms of identity capital individuals can optimise their identity adaptation, allowing them to navigate challenging and unpredictable social environments (Côté, 2016; Kroger, 2007).

Similarly, the current findings also demonstrate muscularity’s versatility and value within the participants’ performance narratives. For example, muscularity appeared to facilitate the construction, enhancement, and successful enactment of multiple identities.

Annie described the transfer of her strength, as a powerlifter, into her competencies within her occupational role;

The strength has carried over into my job [as an osteopath], definitely...It [weight training and muscular strength] has massive [benefits] because I mean, I am an osteopath, so a lot of the time you do get judged if you are a woman because they think you are weak you won't be able to do the right...I quite take pride now, you know, in hurting people.

Physical strength has obvious benefits within Annie's role as an osteopath, but the current participants also described muscularity's role as a form of identity capital in the performance of other, non-muscle or health-related, identities. Mitchell (physique trainer at Revival) explains how his visual muscularity help him generate good impressions in his job in IT;

Like the work environment I am in, it's a very heated environment so it's a lot of, you have to present yourself...I think generally if I can look physically fit or present myself in a suit... look like I am carved out of stone...in a career sense [that] will instantly, my boss will assume that I'm just hardworking you know. Hardworking because I've obviously kept myself in shape. Er, I am well presented so that again that goes with hard work or conditioning. So [I am] organised and hardworking. So, before he even knows anything about me, you know what I can actually do in my job, the guy's got a great impression of me. Whether I can do the job or not by that point he has probably about 80%, his decisions are made whether I'm worth the time.

Muscularity and bodybuilding do appear to increase the sense of competency and positive image in certain occupational roles (Coquet et al., 2013; Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013; Klein, 1993; McVeigh & Evans-Brown, 2009). These occupations discussed in the muscle literature, however, are often focused around masculine roles or environments where muscularity has a prominent value and functional benefit, such as



security guards, prison officers, and health and fitness specialists (Coquet et al., 2013;

Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013; Klein, 1993; McVeigh & Evans-

Brown, 2009). The current study builds on the occupational influence muscularity has and

suggests that it may have a more versatile role and benefit a variety of social and

occupational identities that do not necessarily require a muscular physique, such as office

workers and teachers.

The current findings suggest that muscularity is a valuable source of identity capital that allows individuals to stimulate other intangible resources. Both the tangible and intangible capital appeared to be vital resources within the participants' identity performance narratives. Specifically, developing muscularity and the associated intangible qualities appeared to generate an ability to control the personal and social elements of the participants' identities and achieve consistent identity performances in various social contexts. This ascendancy over their personal qualities and social images reflects the concept of identity mastery, which consists of controlling internal and external factors (e.g., personal feelings and others' impressions respectively; Sampson, 1978).. As part of the participants' overarching identity performance narratives and stories of self-mastery through muscularity, 3 themes were expressed.

### **Mastery Through Muscle; Three Identity Narrative Themes**

The 3 narrative themes demonstrated the different meanings assigned to muscularity and the specific roles it played in identity construction, mastery, and performance. The narrative themes provided insight into the way muscularity was used to gain control over the personal and social aspects associated with a successful performance of the participants' multiple identities. Specifically, the themes placed differing values on the personal (e.g., core values, capabilities, and qualities) and social (e.g., role expectations, social images, and perceptions of others') aspects of the participants' identities. The current individuals appeared to draw on the different themes interchangeably depending on their self-perceptions, the social context, and their desired

identity performance. The narrative themes discussed by the participants were internalisation, compensation, and promotion.

**The internalist theme.** An internalist narrative theme was characterised by the internalisation of muscularity as a self-empowering resource; framing increases in physical muscle and strength as ways of increasing their personal feelings of self-belief, independence, and self-satisfaction. There was a distinct focus on one's personal identity, with a prioritisation of self-empowerment and personal enhancement being at the forefront of these narratives. Alongside this personal focus, there was a clear disregard for social expectations and the perceptions of others, which was epitomised by an active non-conformity to traditional images or identity beliefs. Internalising muscularity, focusing on the enhancement of personal qualities, and negating any external pressures meant the individuals could successfully "get by" and navigate their social fields "on their own terms" (Leanne, Revival). Drawing on an internalist theme achieved a stable, coherent, and self-sufficient identity performance across several contexts.

In the current study, 2 women (Annie and Leanne) expressed this narrative theme as a way of rejecting traditional feminine identities and overcoming associated restrictions in their personal sense of self and assuredness. Existing research on female weightlifters suggests that strength is a central feature of their sense of self, allowing them to forge a subjective outlook, reduce the perceived pressure of being judged by others, and encourage a sense of empowerment and feeling good (Brace-Govan, 1998, 2002). Similarly, within the current narrative theme muscularity was framed as an acceptable resource for the individuals to create a "different view of themselves", one that enacted a strong and independent identity that was "antithetical to femininity" (Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 416; MacKinnon, 1987, p. 121). For example, Annie described the internalisation of her physical strength and the effects this had on her general sense of self and ability to negate social expectations, which positively influenced social identities (e.g., being a mother);

Actually doing all this [powerlifting] has just made me realise what I am capable of I suppose. And like I said you look in the mirror and you see someone who's strong, then you know, you feel it, you feel strong [mentally and emotionally]... You know inside almost... I don't feel like I need validation off anybody else anymore... There comes a point where I think most people will realise that they want to be more than what they are socially supposed to be, like a mum, or a wife... I've just accepted that it's a good way to be different [being muscular and strong] because everyone else is just holding themselves back, trying to play [traditional] roles, rather than being themselves... the woman's always [expected to be] the small, weak, one kind of thing... I'm a single mother, with a child, I don't want Brad [her son] to look at me and think... you know that I am a weak person... I want him to see me as a strong person, and that I can achieve these things, and that his mum is probably stronger than most men are... [for some women] it's [weight training] almost the fear of stepping out of those social norms for sure.

The development of strength (e.g., tangible capital), associated enhancements in confidence, determination, and self-belief, and the decreased concern with others' expectations (e.g., intangible capital) represented by the internalist theme, reflected a successful mastery of the individuals' identities (Sampson, 1978). This identity mastery and accrue ment of identity capital allowed the individuals to successfully adapt to, and overcome, challenging situations and achieve a coherent identity performance (Kroger, 2007; Sampson, 1978), as Leanne described;

Following the sudden loss of my father in Feb 2013, which had such a devastating impact on me, I lost focus on all aspects of my life... [I] felt that I had lost control over other areas of my life... I couldn't concentrate on things, lost interest in work and felt I was just existing from one day to the next and in danger of slipping into depression if I wasn't already... Training with weights has benefitted me hugely. It has showed me I can achieve things I didn't think I would be able to do. I now use

the same determination and positive approach to other areas of my life [other than the gym]. When I doubt myself, or am finding things difficult, I remind myself that if I can achieve what I have done through my training and apply that same determination and effort...The discipline, determination and effort required is something I draw on hugely. Frankly before I started working out this way [with weights] I was rather an emotional mess but not anymore. I can still have emotional issues to deal with, but I don't allow myself to get overwhelmed. It can be hard but feeling stronger in body and mind helps enormously.

Most existing research demonstrates that women express several identity-related concerns about muscularity and weight training (Chananie, McGrath, & Stoll, 2012; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Specifically, research describes a socially induced “glass ceiling” on women’s physical strength (Dworking, 2001) and a fear of becoming “too muscular” (Angier, 1999, p. 293) or “looking too much like a guy” (Krane et al., 2004, p. 320). Female bodybuilders also refer to the perceptions of others that building muscularity as a female is a deviant behaviour (Chananie et al., 2012). The current narrative theme, however, appeared to demonstrate a blueprint that focused on muscular strength as a beneficial strategy for negotiating societal expectations, norms, and imposed identities in ways that avoid their disempowering effects (Brace-Govan, 2002; Wesley, 2001). Identifying this narrative theme provides an interpretive lens to understand some women’s identity-related reasoning for seeking strength and understand muscularity’s role in constructing, mastering, and performing non-traditional identities. Such findings may help future studies explore the ever-growing female engagement in muscle building regimes.

**The compensator theme.** The compensator theme framed muscularity and physical strength as protective resources that mask and disguised any personal qualities that were perceived to be incompatible or undesirable within one’s social identity. Participants demonstrated a clear emphasis on social identity as part of the compensator

theme, whereby they sought to achieve desired social images and meet the expectations of significant others despite not always possessing suitable personal qualities and capabilities. By adopting the compensator theme the individuals demonstrated some malleability in their identities through their physiques, which allowed them to compensate for any perceived shortfalls in their personal identity and project desired social images and achieve a successful sense of identity.

Like the current findings, the existing literature discusses muscularity as compensatory resource for men's masculine identities. Specifically, developing a muscular physique, for some men, is a way of earning "man point's" and compensating for a lack of masculine traits and engaging in marginalised behaviours, such as weakness, low self-esteem, and homosexuality (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Klein, 1993). Three participants (two male and one female) expressed a compensator narrative theme. One of the men I observed, Mike, was a large successful powerlifter and well-known figure around the gym. Paul, the owner of Cast Iron, described Mike's physique and the assertion and control that characterised his social image, which all appeared to benefit his role as a powerlifting coach;

Mike for his age has a phenomenal physique, and he is ridiculously strong. He is great to get working with the guys here [referring to the powerlifting students] because they look at him and listen because he looks the part, he can really assert himself on them.

Many also alluded to Mike's arrogant and attention seeking nature, such as Greg (a recreational lifter at Cast Iron); "He swans about in his tight lycra, grunting, and showing off how much he can lift...but boy is he a strong lad, I wouldn't tell him that though, his head is big enough". Mike, however, demonstrated a personal identity that contrasted the views of his peers and students. He came across as timid, introverted, and in no way dominant or arrogant. Like existing research, he described muscularity as a resource that compensated for his personal lack of dominance and masculinity;

I would say there is a lot masculinity attached to weightlifting [and powerlifting]... if there is any word to describe me it is not masculine... I am not a very alpha personality... an alpha personality is someone who is very dominant in their actions and psychology, the sort of person who becomes the centre of attention and thrives off it... I don't like to say hey, watch how much I can squat. [Dominance] is something that needs to come across sometimes because I do a lot of teaching and coaching in different things [school sport and powerlifting] and it's beneficial... but it's not something that comes naturally to me or that I thrive off... [Being big and muscular] helps convey me as a more dominant personality, but it doesn't really affect how I am... I was going to compare it to looking at something through a lens, the lens can change how something is perceived without any change to the object itself.

Mike's physique meant he could convey the masculine image and dominance his social image required of him in a coaching setting (e.g., controlling and managing his athletes), without possessing these traits as part of his personal qualities (e.g., who he thought he really was). Developing a muscular physique meant his personal traits did not hold him back and he could meet the masculine expectations of his social role and peers, such as a dominant, confident, and assertive coach. In doing so he created a coherent sense of self and reflected the mastery of his identity through the compensator narrative theme.

The existing literature tends to focus on muscle's compensatory role in masculine settings and identities (e.g., de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Klein, 1993), but the current study suggests that muscularity's role in a compensator narrative may also guide many individuals' identities in different social contexts not governed by masculinity. For example, Amber alluded to how the development of her physical strength allowed her to "hide" her personal sense of insecurity and timidity, and project a confident and robust image in her role as a lecturer;

I do feel that being in the gym and lifting weights really does add something to me.

Like I often doubt myself, I get anxious really easily, and just generally worry about what people think, but that's just me I can't change that...When I am in the gym, this doesn't matter, my strength does away with it all...Being strong and looking strong adds an extra layer to me, it covers up the real me. That shy woman. Which is great when I have to stand up and engage with a room full of students, I can be confident, I can tell them what to do, and the buy into me...So yeah the lifting and strength gives me extra layers to protect the real me.

The compensator theme enabled the coexistence of contrasting personal and social elements of identities without hindering the individuals' sense of self. Specifically, muscularity allowed individuals to navigate different social requirements, images, and expectations despite these sometimes conflicting with their personal and core values, characteristics, and beliefs. The current findings demonstrate a narrative theme that frames muscularity as form of identity capital that can act as compensatory and protective resource to master one's identity and provide a strategy for individuals to cope with ever-changing and diverse social expectations.

**The promoter theme.** The promoter narrative theme was characterised by the use of muscularity as an advertising resource to accentuate perceived personal strengths in the context of one's social image and identity. Specifically, muscularity aided the promotion and transference of suitable personal qualities and capabilities into the individuals' social roles and environments. The promotional role of muscularity appeared to reflect more of a harmony between the personal and social aspects identity than the previous two narrative themes. Achieving compatibility between the personal and social elements of the individuals' identities through their muscularity created transferability whereby individuals could draw on core personal identity qualities to enhance their social images in a various contexts and achieve their overall identity performances.

Six men discussed a promoter narrative theme. One of which, Thor (gym owner and PT), shared how a muscular physique formed a vital part of his social, occupational, identity and reflected a successful fulfilment of his role as a personal trainer and gym owner (Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013). Thor believed his muscular image advertised personal qualities, capabilities, and characteristics (e.g., knowledge, determination, and commitment) that were vital for his clients' perceptions of him within the gym. These findings echo the physical and bodily capital literature whereby a fitness specialist's physique (e.g., PTs and S&C coaches) acts as their "business card" and reflects their knowledge, skill set, and competencies (Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013, p. 18). As Thor said;

Owning this place means that you have to look like you know what you are doing a little bit as well. You know, if a financial advisor turned up in a Ferrari I suppose you'd make damn sure you listened to him. If he's turned up in an Escort diesel you'd think well, you know, what sort of advice is this fella' going to give me...It's the same in here... They can tell from looking at me that I have been through the process, I have learned all the things that I suppose they need to learn that would be advantageous to them....So, for me I suppose it's commercially important to be muscular... The benefits to me is members approach me, I can get them doing things correctly, I can make sure that they are happy in their environment, and it makes for a successful business, which puts money in the account and then the business can function so for me that's important. (Thor, Revival)

Similarly, Jason (bodybuilder at Revival and nutritionist) described how his physique advertised his knowledge and hard work, which had a positive impact on his social, occupational, identity;

I think it [being muscular] just puts you, like as an expert [referring to health and nutrition knowledge]...Walking it [being muscular and in shape] and talking it, you have got to be your own business card. So, what people see is two guys [him and



his business partner] that are in shape, that is a much better advertisement...it

shows that we know what we are talking about and that we put the hard work in ourselves, you know practice what we preach.

Muscularity's role as identity capital within the promoter theme appeared to be versatile and benefit in multiple social identities, even in social environments not consumed by muscular aesthetics or physical strength. For example, two of the current men (Loki and Arnold) discussed how muscularity helped them promote and transfer their desirable personal qualities into their social identities as high school teachers. Generally, a muscular physique and a commitment to exercise, such as weight training, project positive messages and characteristics that transcend beyond the gym and health and fitness environment (Doğan, 2015). Loki, specifically, described muscularity's ability to communicate positive messages about the professionalism, hard work, and confidence he felt were his personal qualities, which allowed him to generate instant positive impressions within his role as a high school teacher;

When I go to the DfE (Department for Education) as part of my teaching consultancy role, I am very much aware of fitness, muscularity, and strength and what this lends to my appearance to others, as these people don't know me, and I haven't had time to build up relationships with them. In that sense, strength and muscularity allows me to rapidly say something about myself to new people... I believe it [his physique] speaks to my disciplined professionalism, as it can be seen as a manifestation of my maintained routines and hard work...Several people mentioned this outward confidence to me...I also believe this [his physique] transmits a message to the students that you are active, lively and switched on, rather than the image transmitted of a tired, inactive and distracted teacher. Students tend to mirror their teachers, who often act as role models, so being in shape helps to make this a positive environment for students. (Loki, recreational weight lifter, Revival)

Arnold's discussion of muscularity in the teaching context also suggested its role as

identity capital in promoting his personal strengths into his social environment and identity. He perceived that his role as a teacher was to maintain control, achieve a mutual respect, and confidently manage the education of his students. A large muscular physique allowed him to project these desired qualities (which he felt he already possessed), stamp his supremacy over his students and successfully perform his identity as a competent teacher;

It [muscular physique] has a massive effect. You can have a classroom full of kids all messing about but without blowing my own trumpet I can walk in and they will instantly shut up and listen. It's like a respect, or fear, I don't know but I can stamp authority on it. But you see other teachers walking around who aren't in shape, you know a bit fat and out of shape, they often struggle to keep control and the kids don't always seem to respond to them... I have met a few people that can just walk into a room and they just demand respect without saying anything, that's just who they are... Like a guy I knew could walk into a [rugby] changing room, he was in the RAF, and you would listen when he walked in... Having a good physique, and being bigger helps me portray my ability to do this, without it I wouldn't be able to bring that [into the classroom]. Sounds big headed but like I said, I love that I can walk into a room and people the kids will just shut up, and I can get control and get that respect. (Arnold, Revival)

The building of a muscular physique (i.e., tangible capital) as part of a promoter theme accentuated the individuals' possession of intangible capital - which represented their personal qualities (e.g., knowledge, confidence, and control). This promotional interaction between their personal qualities and social images achieved successful mastery and performance of their different identities, which allowed for an optimal navigation of their occupational roles.

Little existing research specifically explores the promotional influence of muscularity in individuals' social identities. Instead the identity enhancement achieved by a muscular physique is often associated with an initial sense of inadequacy or deficit in specific qualities (Klein, 1993; Sparkes et al., 2005), which the current participants did not express. A muscular physique does appear to be valorised in specific working environments, such as security, which may reinforce muscularity as desirable resource for a successful occupational identity (Coquet et al., 2016). The suggestion of a promoter narrative theme builds on existing research (e.g., Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; McVeigh & Evans-Brown, 2009) by offering an insight into how muscularity accentuates desirable personal qualities in people's social images. The muscular promotion of desirable qualities in an individual's occupational identity, may help explain why muscularity becomes validated by these environments and why individuals then feel an increased feeling of competency (Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993).

The narrative themes identified in the current study suggest that individuals assign identity-related meanings to their muscular desires. These narrative themes shared similarities with the proposed strategies (e.g., compensation; Klein, 1993) in the existing research that aimed to build identity capital and achieve a coherent sense of self and negotiate unpredictable events in late-modern society (Côté, 2016). Specifically, the current participants appeared to align their muscularity (both the desire and the use) with appropriate narrative themes in attempt to successfully master the personal and social elements of their identities. Mastering these elements resulted in the successful performances of various identities within given contexts (Côté, 2016; Sampson, 1978).

### **Failed Identity Mastery; A Lack of Personal and Social Coherence**

Not all the current participants achieved successful or desirable identity performances. In some contexts, their chosen narrative themes failed them, and they could not achieve the required coherence between their personal qualities and the social images they needed to project and perform their desired identities. Three of the men, who had

previously expressed successfully following promoter themes, described a failed

promotion in other areas of their life. For example, Arnold discussed how he felt his physical size held him back and did not provide adequate social projection of his personal qualities as a rugby player;

You look at people who are in [good shape], who are playing at a higher level or have done more with their career who didn't work as hard... It's not through lack of mental focus or lack of mental strength, it's something in your body [referring to muscularity levels]...Tristan [team mate] looked ridiculous and he had all these stupidly big muscles and stuff like that and yeah it's impressive...but [I] could always beat him over a 100 meters type thing and you always thought well I am more skilful than him, and work harder than him. And like when he got taken on by Rotherham I was just like well fair enough I get it [he was taken for his size].

Similarly, Harry referred to the mastery and desire for coherence between his perceived personal qualities and his social image as a PT;

I guess I want how people look at me, and how I look to represent my actual effort [in the gym and at work] and be equal... you know to get stronger and to not see any changes [visually] is disheartening... I still look [at other PT's in the gym] and go he is bigger than me and then I am aware that I am stronger than him, and I work harder, so I should be bigger than him so that's not justice. I see some people who I am stronger than, but they are bigger, and I just think...they don't deserve it

The lack of coherence between their personal qualities and their social images reflected narrative misalignment, which is when an individual's experiences are no longer in-line with their dominant narrative (McLeod, 1997). By failing to successfully promote their personal qualities in their social roles, the participants narratives became misaligned with their chosen theme, which made them feel that their overall identity performances were hindered and unsuccessful. The misalignment with their chosen narrative theme and overarching performance narrative appeared to stimulate the perception that they needed to

be more muscular and accrue more of their socially valuable identity capital as a way of

restoring their performance narrative, as Harry described;

I do want to be bigger...like a desperation to be bigger...I think the bigger I am, the stronger I am, the better I think I look... I think me being bigger makes me better [as a PT and person generally]...I want like growth in all areas [of life]...how I look [muscular] to, to women, to myself, and to other blokes...that takes me up a few pegs...[muscularity] is something that can enhance all areas.

The quest to build more muscularity and “control” the balance between who they felt they really were (and the qualities they possessed) and what they felt others saw appeared to encourage risky and dysfunctional behaviours. For example, some discussed the use of IPEDs. IPED research commonly discusses body image satisfaction as a key motivator for steroid use (Greenway & Price, 2018; Kimergård & McVeigh, 2014; McVeigh & Evans-Brown, 2009). The current findings, however, suggest that the satisfaction with one’s body and the decision to seek increased levels of muscularity through steroids may have been guided by a misalignment in the individuals’ identity performance narratives and chosen themes. For example, Harry discussed how he felt his physical appearance did not reflect his muscular strength, and how gaining more visual muscle mass through steroid use produced a desirable and successful social image and identity performance as a PT in the gym, which gave him more satisfaction;

Part of my justification was like I have hit this level [of muscularity] now and I am stronger, and maxed out my genetics...we have got to a certain point with the training...The strength changes I made and the lack of physical changes [appearance], I guess that was my tipping point...I guess that’s where the gear [steroids] stuff comes in...when we were shredded we would walk through the gym and I remember being of aware of that [everyone looking at us], and thinking like this is awesome, this is what I want...We want people to go on there [PT website]

and be like f\*\*\* these guys are in shape...I am much happier where I am now. And

I think that is down to the gear.

Like Harry, Jason described the association between their physical muscularity and their social image as PTs; “Like we say people will look at us and go Jason and Harry are in good nick, they’re PTs”. Jason also expanded on the perceived plateau these men hit with “normal” training and alluded to how steroids provided them with more muscular identity capital;

We both train really hard but then we have got f\*\*\*ing pretty garbage genetics...I don’t think I could have got to the stage [referring to a lean, muscular, physique] we got to for the [promotional PT] photoshoot without doing something [steroids]... it was one of those where I thought I had got to my limit...I’m not going to get any bigger, I am not going to get any stronger, so that’s when I first used it...With steroids you get more bang for your buck

The current findings support some existing steroid research, which suggests that individuals engage in IPED use as a way of overcoming a lack of progress from weight training alone (Grogan, 2008; Wright et al., 2000). Like Harry and Jason’s discussions, some literature also refers to identity-related motives associated with projecting and fulfilling specific occupational images and roles (McVeigh & Evans-Brown, 2009).

As well as steroid use, Arnold described an obsessive relationship with muscularity and the sacrifices he made to build muscle as identity capital and realign with his promoter narrative theme, which appeared to impair his social life and occupational decisions;

I would sacrifice everything else [to go to the gym]...I feel if you don’t go to the gym, you don’t do your extra fitness, if you don’t go to training then you’re kind of cheating yourself type thing...Christmas day like I’d be training...literally begging one of the local gym owners [to open the gym]... He’d give me the keys to go and train and it’s like because I didn’t want anything getting in the way of what I wanted to do [build muscle]... You know, like, a job comes up an hour away at a

school. It's like travel an hour in every morning. Fine, that's alright. [But] then I have got to travel an hour back at night. You're going to hit rush hour traffic, which means you're not getting your weights session done. I know this sounds like lazy but like honestly muscularity and size means absolutely everything to me.

Existent research on MD has described similar attitudes and impacts of muscular desires on individuals' lives, suggesting people will prioritise tending to their muscularity over other social activities and roles, causing them to miss work, decline social invitations with friends, and loose romantic partners (Murray et al., 2011; Pope et al., 1997, 2000a). Although the current study did not explore MD specifically, the findings may suggest that the development and expression of obsessive and socially dysfunctional relationships with muscularity may be influenced by the desire to construct and perform desired identities and be a result of a misalignment with the narratives individuals construct.

The current findings support existing research that suggests IPED use and obsessions with exercise are related to increased desires for muscularity (Chittester & Hausenblas, 2009; Parent & Moradi, 2011; Edwards et al., 2014 Thomas et al., 2014). Exploring the stories behind the potential relationships in the current study, however, demonstrates that people's obsession with building muscle and the risky behaviours they may take may be bound in deeper identity-related narratives.

## **Conclusions**

The current study makes several key findings related to the muscular desires present in the weight training cultures. My current observations demonstrate that individuals may have different muscular projects and desires with disparate contextual meanings (e.g., appearance and performance). These different muscular projects appear to be shaped by the surrounding gym and subcultural interactions, which reinforce muscularity as a valuable resource to construct and perform specific subcultural identities. My interactions with the current participants also suggest that muscularity's role may span beyond the gym and provide individuals with identity capital to master and perform

multiple identities in various social contexts beyond the gym. The participants appeared to frame muscularity's role in the mastery and performance of their identities within three different narrative themes – internalist, compensator, and promoter. These narrative themes created a central meaning for their muscularity characterised by different uses associated with the mastery of the participants' perceived personal qualities and their desired social images. When this mastery was not achieved, the narrative theme became misaligned, and the desired identity performances were not successful, some participants appeared to seek supplementary behaviours (e.g., steroid use) to accrue more muscular identity capital and realign with their narrative theme and enact successful identities. The current findings contribute to the literature in the following ways;

Firstly, the current chapter's findings widen the lens on the weight training culture, presenting the different muscular projects (e.g., appearance and performance) within a range of subcultural training identities. As mentioned, the existing research tends to focus on bodybuilding identities and contexts (Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999), which only offers a narrow cultural perspective for muscular desires. Existing research exploring different subcultures, although limited, suggests differences in the muscular desires between training groups, but fails to provide in-depth insight into the subcultural differences (Hale et al., 2010).

The current findings inform the literature of the importance of understanding the inner workings of a range of weight training subcultures because what they do, what they represent, and the muscular projects and quests they commit to appear to differ. These differences seem to shape and underpin the construction of individuals' subcultural training identities. Such findings build on existing research by suggesting that existing muscular concepts, such as DFM, and overgeneralised views of muscular desires may not be suited to embrace the diverse array of muscular projects that seem to guide individuals' muscle-focused desires, behaviours, and identities. Embracing the potential diversity and complexity of muscular desires within the gym could help avoid stereotyping weight



trainers and blanketing them under the same assumed superficial appearance-driven motives.

Additionally, the different muscular projects appeared to be continually shaped and projected by various social interactions and practices. The current findings inform existing literature that individuals may not enter the gym with preconceived muscular projects, but instead they are exposed to geographical, interpersonal, and behavioural messages that guide and shape their subcultural tastes and identities. Existing research provides some brief descriptions of sectorisation within the gym and subculturally informed ethnophysiology that shapes the perceived norms and ways of viewing muscularity within the bodybuilding culture (Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). The current findings provide a more detailed insight into the specific interactions and the different messages present in multiple subcultural training contexts. Identifying these social interactions and practices within the different subcultures suggest that the development and expressions of individuals' muscular projects may be shaped by multiple direct sociocultural and environmental influences (e.g., coaches or peers). Such findings inform future studies of the need to adopt more naturalistic approaches and explore the social context of the gym and the interpersonal and cultural interactions through which people's muscular desires may be constructed.

Secondly, the current suggestion of muscularity as tangible identity capital builds on the framing of muscularity various sources of embodied capital (e.g., masculine, physical, and bodily; de Visser et al., 2009; Shilling, 2013; Wacquant, 1995). Specifically, muscularity, in the current study, appeared to be an influential and beneficial resource across multiple identities, cultures, and social contexts, not just within the gym. This broad versatility suggested that interpreting muscularity as a form of identity capital avoids imposing narrow and restrictive cultural assumptions and connotations (e.g., masculine construction) onto the desire for muscularity. For example, framing muscularity as masculine capital or physical capital in the gym, may predetermine muscularity as a

resource exclusive to those contexts or identities. The current study, however,

demonstrates that muscularity can be versatile and coherently benefit a range of social environments and identities, not just the gym or men.

The current findings also suggest that muscularity as a tangible form identity capital that can be used in many ways (e.g., empowering, masking, and promoting), which can influence and interact with an individual's intangible capital (e.g., resilience, dominance, and control). These possession of, and interaction between the two forms of capital, appear to facilitate the mastery and successful performances of the individuals' identities. Existing literature suggests that muscularity is a symbolic resource for constructing various identities, such as masculinity (e.g., Bridges, 2009; Klein, 1993). The current findings advance these findings by proposing that muscularity plays a specific role in optimising intangible resources and mastering the personal and social elements of the participants' identities (Sampson, 1978), which helped achieve desired identity performances. Developing a portfolio of both tangible and intangible identity capital can provide healthy identity transitions and functioning, as well as resolving adult and social identities (Côté, 1996, 2002, 2016; Eriksson, 1959). The current findings may inform future research of the potential in exploring muscularity through an identity capital lens, and its potential benefit in aiding identity transitions and conflict resolution (Eriksson, 1959). Such future work could build on the current study and provide further understanding of the deeper identity-related meanings, and additional narrative themes, that may frame people's muscular desires and their maintained investment in muscularity.

Thirdly, the current study proposes a global identity performance narrative that encompasses the successful enactment of multiple social roles. The underlying commitment and desire to construct, perform, and fulfil their multiple identities through their muscularity informed the use of a performance narrative genre, which is epitomised by a similar dedication to, and focus on, achieving success (Douglas & Carless, 2006). The performance narrative has predominantly been applied within the sporting context and

reflects Dacyshyn's (1999; p. 217) indication that for many athletes "sport is life and life is sport". Other researchers also suggest that academia may also endorse a performance agenda and narrative, which encourages individuals to monitor and control their levels of success and capabilities, which feeds their overall sense of self (Evans, Rich, & Holroyd, 2004; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). These joint "narrative forces" (e.g., sport and academia) may intensify the pressure placed on some individuals to succeed and achieve in various social realms, which may guide them towards behaviours that stimulate or facilitate the sense of achievement (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014, p. 694). For example, sporting performance pressures may encourage the achievement of specific body ideals through various body regulation behaviours, such as self-starvation and excessive exercise, with the goal of attaining sporting success and established self-identities (Busanich et al., 2012, 2014; Douglas, 2009; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014).

The proposal of a global identity performance narrative and multiple themes may encompass a variety of "narrative forces" and embrace the different social fields and roles that appear to contribute to an individual's sense of self and identities. The availability of different narrative themes (e.g., internalist, compensator, and promoter), suggested by the current study, allows individuals to assign different meanings to their desires, views, and uses of muscularity, as resources for various identity constructions, mastery, and performances.

Many stories of muscular desire suggest that the development of a muscular physique is fuelled by several identity-focused motives, such as a need to enhance or redeem masculine identities, and overcome undesirable characteristics (de Visser et al., 2009; Klein, 1993, 1995). Identifying the different performance narrative themes (e.g., internalist, compensator, and promoter) in the current study contribute contextual backdrops for the different identity-fuelled stories of muscular desire in the current study. The current findings provide multiple cultural blueprints that may allow us to interpret and

better understand the meaningful affinities for muscularity and commitments to enhancing one's physique as way to optimising one's identity performances.

Finally, the identification of unsuccessful identity performances, and the narrative misalignment that affected the mastery of personal qualities and social images, provided context to some of the current participants' excessive desire to build muscularity and the engagement in risky behaviours (e.g., steroids). Existing steroid research shares similar motives for substance use associated with sporting performance and improving occupational images and competencies (McVeigh & Evans-Brown, 2009). Existing explorations of MD also share similar stories to the current study of social and occupation impairment and excessive preoccupations with weight training and building muscle (Murray et al., 2011; Pope et al., 1997, 2000a). The current findings expand on the existing literature and suggest that the role steroids play in increasing muscularity reflect attempts at accruing identity capital with the aim of realigning narrative themes and mastering personal qualities and their social images in their overall identity performance narratives. This obsessive desire to accrue more identity capital within identity performance narratives also provides a contextual understanding that may inform future interpretations of some people's excessive muscle-related behaviours.

### **Future Research**

The current study informs future research of the value in approaching the weight training culture as a network of subcultures that all have different muscle-related agendas and identities. There is need for more research into the various training subcultures to better understand the varied muscular projects that people invest in. Understanding the meanings and attributions of the different projects can help us develop better ways of evaluating people's concerns. Currently, the focus on appearance in existing muscle research and conceptualisations (e.g., McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Pope et al., 1997) may overlook some individuals' reasons for weight training (e.g., health, performance, or function).

Future studies could also follow up by exploring muscular desires through a broader “identity-narrative lens” that embraces the influential role of muscularity in mastering and performing various identities beyond the gym and masculinity. Future research may also explore the viewpoints of significant social others that appeared to inform the current participants perception of the social expectations and required attributes. For example, a better understanding of the social connotations attributed to muscularity by significant others, such as employers or clients, may help educate individuals about the actual images and perceptions of others hold of them, which could minimise any dysfunctional or excessive concern with increasing muscle mass.

Additionally, researchers could employ a more positive outlook, rather than focusing on the negative relationships between muscular desires and other variables that seems to dominate the literature such as anxiety, depression, and reduced psychological coping (Edwards et al., 2014). In relation to the previous suggestion, the current study informs future research of the need to also explore the potentially positive consequences of possessing a desire for muscularity and developing a muscular physique.

### **Limitations**

The current study explored the activities and narratives in 2 specific gyms, whose cultures may different significantly from other gyms. The experiences and narratives in the current study may be some of many and represent the socially constructed nature, diversity, and complexity of muscular desires. The findings, however, do inform the future research and inspire an exploration of other weight training subcultures and the personal stories they may shape. A second limitation was the potential for my presence as a researcher and outsider to alter the behaviour and expressions of the participants. When exploring muscularity and bodily concerns and desires, especially in men, the issue of emotional integrity may limit the findings. Traditional societal views may restrict people’s willingness to share their true feelings and desires through a fear of being judged or marginalised, which could encourage them to withhold or exaggerate information and

experiences (Shepard & Rickard, 2012). My prolonged engagement with the

individuals and the rapport I developed, however, helped build trusting relationships, which reduced the fear of judgement.

Similarly, my lack of objectivity as the researcher, was also a potential limitation in that my response to given situations may have unintentionally influenced the response or behaviour of the participants. Making my own values and perspectives clear from the onset, however, allowed readers to make their own assumptions about the interpretations I presented. Additionally, the aim of narrative analysis focuses on subjective, multiple, realities and the social co-construction of stories (Papathomas, 2016). My role was potentially beneficial in constructing and capturing the current individuals' stories and perceptions, which helped achieve the aims of the current thesis.

In conclusion, the current study provides valuable insight into the identity-related meanings and uses weight training individuals assign to their muscular projects and desires both in and outside the gym environment. The emergence of muscularity as a more versatile form of identity capital with benefits that span beyond the gym, such as general sense of personal enhancement and the successful performance of various social identities, is novel. The adaptability and usefulness of muscularity may inform further investigation of its role in other social groups' identities, such as different professional occupations. The current findings build on the previous studies (chapters 4 and 5) by proposing that muscularity may not only influence a masculine identity, but it may also be valuable in constructing and managing a range of multiple identities. The widespread versatility of muscularity suggests that muscular desires may develop from sociocultural interactions that reinforce muscularity as valuable capital to achieve successful identity performances. Additionally, the current findings demonstrate the role muscularity plays as identity capital in individuals' identities and the positive, and negative, consequences this can have on individuals' sense of self, mental well-being, and behaviours. The following chapter further discusses the collective findings of the current PhD studies in relation to the thesis

questions. I also discuss the implications of the current thesis findings, suggest areas for future research, and propose the application of the current PhD findings to the world of health and fitness professionals.

**Table 3**

Participant demographics and number of interviews.

Participant	Sex	Age <sup>a</sup>	Occupation	Training Frequency (days per week)	No. Interviews <sup>b</sup>
Annie	Female	29	Osteopath	5	2
Leanne	Female	52	Admin	4	2
Amber	Female	31	University Lecturer	3	2
Thor	Male	41	Gym Owner	5	2
Mike	Male	20	Sports Coach	4	2
Mitchell	Male	32	IT Worker	5	1
Loki	Male	42	High School Teacher	3	2
Jake	Male	27	Osteopath	5	2
Arnold	Male	31	High School teacher	5	3
Harry	Male	27	Nutrition Coach	5	2
Jason	Male	37	Nutrition Coach	5	2

*Note:* <sup>a</sup> All ages refer to time of interview. <sup>b</sup>Number of interviews are formal interviews in person, or via email, and do not include informal conversations.



**Table 4**

Chosen qualitative research credibility criteria and actions taken in the ethnography.

Credibility Criteria	Description	Action Taken
Worthy Topic (Tracy, 2010)	Is the topic interesting, relevant, timely and significant?	The current study emerged from the findings of two previous studies highlighting the need to understand the social context and environment of the gym to aid the understanding of DFM development. In doing so, we can begin to understand the currently unclear development and “life impact” of DFM.
Rich Rigour (Tracy, 2010)	A demonstration of appropriate time, effort, care, and thoroughness to ensure the quality and support of the study claims.	The first author frequently and consistently immersed himself in the culture (8-12 hours weekly), interacting as a participant-observer with the individuals who met the criteria for the study goals, and did so until there was an apparent saturation of data (highlighted by a repetition of occurrences and observations). Two journals documented the data, which were written up within 24 hours of observations, providing detailed and thorough insights into the observations and researcher’s interpretations.
Transparency (Tracy, 2010; Smith & Caddick, 2012)	A consideration for honesty in the research process, the researchers own expectations, and an openness to seek scrutiny for the work (i.e., theoretical assumptions, or methodological procedures)	Throughout the current ethnography, the expectations and views of the researcher are interweaved within the presentation of findings. By doing this, the challenges and unexpected twists became clear to readers and allowed them to judge the interpretations and points of view. Additionally, the data, procedures, and field notes were frequently shared with other researchers and subject to criticism and feedback allowing reflection and alternative viewpoints.
Credibility (Tracy, 2010; Smith & Caddick, 2012)	Relates to the fairness, appropriateness, and plausibility of the interpretations made. Includes practices such as thick description, triangulation, multivocality, and member reflections.	The current study provided rich detail and context to the observed behaviours and situations allowing readers to make their own conclusions. The varied forms of data, and several voices used achieved triangulation, and cross-validation of interpretations. Interpretations were shared with participants to encourage correspondence and fairness.

Resonance (Tracy, 2010; Smith & Caddick, 2012)	The ability to affect and reverberate an audience through evocative writing, aesthetic merit, and transferability of findings.	A creative writing style was attempted to produce resonating and evocative reactions in readers. Attempts to place readers in the moment allowing them “feel”, “smell”, and “hear” the gym meant readers was able to empathise with the content and interpretations and see an overlap into their own experiences and situations.
Significant Contribution (Tracy, 2010)	Considering the implications of the research on theoretical understanding, advancement of knowledge, and practical applications.	The current study emerged from previous studies findings, and was rationalised based upon a limited understanding and presence of the understanding of the gym culture in light of DFM development. The scarcity and intrigue motivating the study left scope for knowledge contribution (e.g., understanding DFM development), research advancement (e.g., exploring specific social field influences), and useful practical applications (e.g., supporting those within the culture).
Coherence (Smith & Caddick, 2012)	The production of a clear and meaningful picture that relates specific events or situations, as well as interweaving existing research and theory.	The approach in the current ethnography was to document the journey of the researcher, and present the findings in a temporal and logical fashion that captures the wider picture of the gym experiences and environment. In doing so readers can clearly see and understand the process and emergence of the findings, and understand the way in which the events and experiences unfolded and influenced each other.

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**Chapter Seven: General Discussion**

The following chapter discusses the rationale for the current thesis and presents the key findings in relation to the current PhD research questions and their contributions to existing research. Additionally, I deliberate the strengths, limitations, suggestions for future research, and implications. The purpose of the current thesis was to explore the personal meanings behind individuals' desires for muscularity. The research questions that addressed this purpose were; What different muscular projects are the participants invested in? How do the participants frame their muscularity in the context of their lives and identities? How do the participants' stories of muscular desire develop over time? To address these questions and overall purpose, the current thesis explored the personal narratives and experiences of myself and others invested in various weight training subcultures. Exploring a range of individuals, their stories, and their sociocultural experiences provided insight into the socially constructed narratives that house and shape various symbolic meanings of muscularity within individuals' various identities. The findings helped provide critical insights into the development, role, and effect of muscular desires in individuals' lives and identities. Specifically, the current thesis findings suggest that muscular desires span beyond superficial motivations to "look better" and may have different contextual meanings, such as functionality and appearance, which play a wider influential role, as identity capital, in individuals' multiple identity constructions and performances. These current findings offer several contributions to the existing literature, which are discussed in this chapter.

**Thesis Rationale**

The existing exploration of muscular concerns and desires is predominantly bound by positivist approaches, focusing on quantitative, cross-sectional, research. Additionally, there has been an increased effort to conceptualise, generalise, and pathologise muscularity concerns, such as DFM and MD. Although valuable, we need to approach these findings with caution, avoid over-interpreting them, and minimize the risk of making generalised

assumptions about those who a) experience muscularity concerns, and b) who may engage in behaviours and cultures associated with muscular development (e.g., weight training). It appears that contemporary research lacks insight into people's rich personal stories and fails to embrace the diversity, individuality, and versatility of muscular meanings and desires. This gap inspired and rationalised the current thesis approach; to use rich, qualitative, methodologies to capture the social construction and individuality of muscular stories, their meanings, and the different contexts that guide them. The current PhD studies achieved this purpose by shedding light on the underlying identity-related narratives that shaped and guided a range of muscular meanings and desires.

### **Key Findings & Contributions**

The overall findings depict the presence of multiple socially constructed muscular projects (e.g., appearance and performance-focused muscularity) that became engrained into the participants' various identities as a form of identity capital. The possession of muscularity then appeared to facilitate the construction, resolution, and performance of these multiple identities. Any wreckage or misalignment with the overarching identity performances steered the participants towards a heightened desire for muscularity, which sometimes led to the engagement in risky behaviours. The current findings specifically addressed the thesis questions in the following ways.

#### **What different muscular projects are the participants invested in?**

As I have previously argued the existing muscularity has taken a turn towards conceptualising and pathologising muscular desires (e.g., DFM and MD; McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Pope et al., 1997). These conceptualisations show a distinct focus on visual motives for seeking a muscular physique imposing an emphasis on the big, the lean, and the attractive (McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Pope et al., 1997). The seemingly narrow focus on appearance motives unnecessarily restrict the broader understanding of the potential varied goals that underpin the want for increased muscularity (e.g., I think that I would look better if I gained 10lbs in bulk; DMS, McCreary & Sasse, 2000). The desire for muscularity does

have some associations with fitness orientations, but the emphasis still appears to remain locked on how one's (muscular) body looks (Edwards et al., 2014; Davis et al., 2005).

The issues with applying these concepts and the measurement tools that accompany them, is that they do not provide the context or meaning behind individuals' desires. So, even when quantitative research compares weight training subcultures that potentially hold different muscular goals, we only get an insight into the variance in the levels of muscular drive without any contextual background. Additionally, the image-focus of the assessment tools may not be sensitive enough to capture muscular projects that may be more performance-centred, which again may be providing us with a skewed perception of people's relationships with muscularity.

Some qualitative scholars provide a richer detail to the motivations and projects associated with muscularity. For example, there is some insight into the variability and plurality of the muscular image, suggesting that the "perfect physique" may come in different muscular forms (e.g., Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Monaghan, 1999). There is, however, still a clear predominant focus on the visual value of muscularity and appearance-focused subcultures rather than exploring a range of stories that could provide a more critical insight into the other functional contexts for muscularity, such as strength, power, and physical capabilities (Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999, 2001).

The current thesis shows that muscular desires are not be simply tied to a single appearance-focused body project, such as developing a large, lean, visually attractive physique. The autoethnography, although develops a socially guided emphasis on a muscular image, alludes to the other performance capabilities of muscularity, such as the physical strength that epitomised my observations of my father. Chapters 5 and 6 expand on the various purposes muscle has by demonstrating the participants' investment in different muscular projects that emphasise varying levels of appearance (e.g., size, shape, and leanness) and performance (e.g., strength, power, and functionality). For example,

some participants explained an appearance-focused agenda for their muscular projects that emphasised a desire for a large, visually muscular, and lean physique. Whereas others placed more emphasis on a performance-related goal for their muscularity that focused on strength, power, and physical function. These muscular projects were never mutually exclusively, but there was a clear preferred goal and investment in directed towards either facet of muscularity. For example, participants' in both chapters 5 and 6 described enjoying increases in visual muscle mass that came with weight training, but being strong, fit, and functional was of more importance and took priority and vice versa.

The current thesis builds on the existing research and provides an insight into the variability of muscular projects and suggests that quests for muscularity can be focused around both appearance and performance elements (Abbott & Barber, 2010; Adams, Turner, & Bucks, 2005; Shilling, 2008; Stewart et al., 2013). These different projects suggest that muscular desires may have diverse underpinnings and contextual goals in different training groups and subcultures (e.g., powerlifters, sporting athletes, and strong men). Existing research into these different muscular contexts, however, is limited and directs its efforts towards aesthetic subcultures (e.g., bodybuilding; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). The current PhD findings inform future research that not everybody's muscular projects and desires are centred around appearance and multiple projects may be expressed in the world of weight training. Furthermore, future research should embrace the potential diversity in muscular desires demonstrated by the current thesis and explore different social groups and training subcultures. By not restricting our assumptions to appearance and being open to multiple stories of muscularity we can better understand the range of motives for building a muscular physique, which could inform a better comprehension and evaluation of people's levels of desire for, and relationships with, muscularity.

**How do the participants frame their muscularity in the context of their lives and identities?**

The underlying thread that pervades the current thesis is identity. Identity is a subjective concept and appears to combine elements of self-construction with influences from the social environment, meaning individuals can present themselves in various ways that suitably align with their sociocultural expectations (Adams & Marshall, 1996). The multiplicity of identity and the need to navigate various social environments and roles in modern society, leaves individuals in need of constructing a repertoire of self-presentations (Côté, 2016). To do so, recent scholars have proposed that people must build a bank of versatile sociological and psychological resources with which they can individualise their identities and navigate volatile and ever-changing social fields, roles, and encounters (Côté, 1996; Côté & Levine, 2002, 2016; Côté, 2016). The current thesis makes several identity-related proposals that place muscularity as a key resource for constructing, resolving, and performing multiple identities. These suggestions are the construction of identity performance narratives, muscle as coping resource for identity conflicts, and muscularity as identity capital within the individuals' narratives.

First, I return to the existing explorations of muscularity and identity in the literature, recalling its role in masculinity, subcultural distinction, and some occupational identities. A wealth of research discusses the interaction between muscularity and masculinity, which allows men to enhance, protect, and signify the male patriarchy, dominance, and hegemonic identities (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Brown, 1999; Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Klein, 1993, 1995; Wesley, 2001). Historically a muscular physique was attributed to a man's physical prowess, manual productivity, and strength (Andreasson & Johnsson, 2014; Itula-Abumere, 2013; Klein, 1995; Mishkind et al., 1989). The shift towards a muscular looking body has been attributed to the reduced need for manual labour and physical strength (Klein, 1993, 1995; Mishkind et al., 1989; Mongahan, 2002; Wesley, 2001). It is clear from the existing literature that masculinity represents an

atavistic desire for a muscular physique in some men. Not all men, however, are governed by hegemonic or traditional masculinity, and the weight training field is seeing an increase in female bodybuilders (Andreasson & Johnsson, 2014; Roussell et al., 2010; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009).

Aside from masculinity, developing one's muscularity also appears to feed into individuals' construction of subcultural training identities, which allows them to create a sense of belonging and unity (Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Monaghan, 1999; 2001; Phoenix, 2015). Existing ethnographic works also allude to how individuals are exposed to specific ethnophysiology and learn to evaluate and embody specific muscular norms as a way of constructing these culturally specific training identities, such as bodybuilders (Andreasson, 2014; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). The majority of existing research into subcultural identity construction and muscularity, however, targets the bodybuilding world and the hypermuscular bodies that inhabit this field (Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). Insight into muscularity's infusion into other subcultural identities, however, is limited. Possessing a muscular physique does seem to play some role in signifying both masculine and subcultural identities, but there is limited insight into the scope for muscularity to penetrate other, non-gym or gendered, identities.

Some research offers limited insight into the symbolic meanings a muscular physique has in health and fitness-related (e.g., S&C coaches and PTs; Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014) and limited male dominated occupations (e.g., security and prison guards; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; McVeigh & Evans-Brown, 2009). A muscular physique in these occupations seems to be emblematic of individuals' knowledge, skill set, credibility, and desired traits, such as aggression and violence (Coquet et al., 2016; Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013; McVeigh & Evans-Brown, 2009). The potential scope for muscularity to symbolically represent and communicate desirable



characteristics, capabilities, and competencies inspired the broad perspective for muscular desires and their role in identity in the current thesis.

The specific focus on masculine, gym-related, and health and fitness identities in the current literature may unnecessarily pigeon-hole muscularity's capabilities. The overall thesis findings, however, suggest that muscularity may be a beneficial and versatile resource in constructing, resolving, and performing a variety of identities and roles. Aside from traditional masculinity and health and fitness-related positions, the current thesis suggests muscularity may be useful in other identities where muscle is not always necessary or of obvious benefit (e.g., office workers, teachers, and as a parent) and not just. The following section discusses the proposal of the identity performance narratives that may frame and guide individuals' muscular desires.

**Identity performance narratives.** The current thesis demonstrates that the meanings behind the participants' varying desires for visually and functionally muscular physiques seemed to transcend beyond the physical body. The findings in all 3 current PhD studies suggested that muscularity (visual or functional) played a pivotal symbolic role in the current participants' various identity constructions, mastery, and performances. For example, the autoethnography depicts the development of my overall sense of masculinity and the way a muscular physique became an embodiment of multiple masculine traits, which aided my navigation and fulfilment of several social identities. Similarly, chapter 5 elaborates on the masculine statements that muscularity offered (e.g., hard work, dedication and sacrifice) and contextualises this muscular masculinity within a performance narrative. For example, the men in chapter 5 embedded their desires for a muscular physique in a dedication to successfully advertising and enacting a global masculine identity. Chapter 6 broadened the identity focus and, like existing literature, demonstrated the distinction muscle achieved between subcultural training identities (chapter 6), but also the versatility a muscular physique had in the performance of a broad range identities outside the gym, such as occupational, parental, and athletic (chapter 6).

The multiple identities that appeared to be benefitted by a strong muscular physique in the current studies, informed the proposal that individuals may construct overarching identity performance narratives to frame their muscular desires and the embodiment of multiple socially desirable identity-related attributes (e.g., confidence and sporting competency). Developing muscularity appeared to directly facilitate the construction and performance of desired identities and was guided by 3 potential narrative theme (e.g., internalist, compensator, and promoter), which seemed to allow the participants to negotiate and fulfil their diverse social environments and roles.

The proposed identity performance narrative and associated themes provide contextual backdrops for the existing masculine, gym, and health and fitness-related motivations, desires, and behavioural quests for a muscular physique. For example, the internalist narrative theme provides a backdrop for some women's quest to break traditional feminine restrictions and construct an independent self-identity that negates confining social labels and expectations (Brace-Govan, 2002; Dworking, 2001; MacKinnon, 1987; Wesley, 2001). The compensator narrative theme offers a narrative lens to interpret the attempts to mask perceived inadequacies, incompetencies, or marginalised characteristic and practices through muscularity (de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Klein, 1993). Klein's ethnographic work (1993) makes consistent reference to the use of a hypermuscular physique to create a shell that protects a low self-esteem, and others refer to the "protective cocoon" muscularity creates (Sparkes et al., 2005, p. 145). The promoter narrative theme offers an alternative application of the muscular physique within identity performances, and frames muscular desires as a way of projecting and communicating an individuals' personal strengths, characteristics, and competencies to optimise one's social identity. This promoter theme provides a narrative backdrop for the reported value and use of muscularity to broadcast the competencies of health and fitness professionals and other traditionally muscular occupational identities (Edmonds, 2018; Harvey et al., 2014; Coquet et al., 2016).

Performance narratives have seldomly been used to directly explore and interpret muscular desires directly, and instead are predominantly used in sporting and academic contexts (Dacyshyn, 1999; Douglas & Carless, 2006; Evans, Rich, & Holroyd, 2004; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). Such existing research often seems to depict identity within performance narratives as a result of successful sporting or academic achievements, but the current thesis suggests that identity may itself be the performance. The current thesis also advances the literature by offering a broad interpretive, narrative, lens for future research to explore muscularity's versatile impact and role in other social identities (e.g., occupational). The proposal of an identity performance narrative to frame muscular desires offers a novel suggestion for future explorations of muscularity and identity in the literature.

**Narrative misalignment, wreckage, and resolution.** The investment in performance narratives and discourses appears to provide governance over individuals' sense of identity, the practices they adopt, and the decisions they make in life (Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009; McMahon & Penney, 2012; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). The close association between muscularity and identity within the currently proposed performance narrative may provide us with a means to understand why some individuals not only turn to muscularity for self-enhancement, but also at times of threat, conflict, and potential misalignment or wreckage in their overall performance narratives.

Narrative misalignment reflects the lack of coherence between an individual's experiences and their dominant narratives (McLeod, 1997). Similarly, narrative wreckage is when an event or experience disrupts and decimates a person's narrative (Frank, 1995). Misaligned or wrecked narratives can have detrimental consequences and result in various psychological crises and disturbances, such as depression, shame, and altered self-worth (Douglas & Carless, 2009).

Existing research suggests that a failure to uphold a performance narrative is associated with body-image concerns, disordered eating, and extreme exercise (Busanich

et al., 2012; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). Specifically, these perceptions and practices are seen as ways of succeeding and abiding by the performance narrative when other focal areas of life (e.g., sport or academia) have failed (Busanich et al., 2012; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). Existing studies may suggest that body-related features, such as muscularity, could play a crucial role in attempting to restore performance narratives. All 3 current studies support the muscularity's utility in resolving potential narrative misalignment and wreckage. Chapter 4 shared my desire to develop muscularity as a way of addressing social induced perceptions of incompetency and inadequacy in my physique and what it represented (chapter 4). The life-history study demonstrated how the investment in building muscularity and associated behaviours could help redeem and restore threatened muscular masculine performances (chapter 5). Chapter 6 alludes the misalignment of individuals' identities with their overarching narratives. Specifically, the findings suggested that when individuals perceived personal qualities and social images are not coherent their identity performances are hindered. To achieve coherence and realign their perceived identities with their overall performance narrative, the participants appeared to express a heightened (and sometimes obsessive) desire to build muscle, which often led to harmful and risky behaviours (e.g., steroid use). The latter findings may provide a deeper, identity-related, narrative context for the use of IPED's, which contributes to the existing steroid literature and informs future explorations of their use (e.g., McVeigh & Evans-Brown, 2009; Wright et al., 2000).

Additionally, chapter 5 proposed 3 realignment narratives (e.g., redemption, reliance, and relapse) that framed the attempts to address narrative wreckage through their muscularity. Existing research suggests that counter-narratives can be constructed to overcome the disrupted or absent dominant narrative and add new meaning to the altered experiences (Crossley, 2000; Douglas & Carless, 2009). Counter-narratives, for me, could be interpreted as being more enduring replacements. The proposed realignment narratives

provided different, temporary, templates to cope with masculine threats and reinstate their normal performances through their physiques and muscular projects.

Experiencing narrative misalignment and wreckage in the current thesis appeared to be stimulated by perceived conflicts in the participants' identities. Specifically, the current thesis drew on Erikson's (1959) idea of conflict resolution in people's identity development. The evaluative comparisons I made in chapter 4, the threat of injury to the participant's masculinity in chapter 5, and the incoherence within individuals' identities in chapter 6 were interpreted using two of Erikson's (1959) specific identity conflicts (industry vs. inferiority and identity vs. role confusion). Existing research is yet to use Erikson's theory to interpret the role of muscularity in individuals' construction and resolution of identities. The current thesis may suggest that some individuals' narrative misalignment and wreckage may be stimulated and influenced by these specific identity conflicts. Additionally, by proposing the desire for muscularity may be grounded in muscle's ability to both proactively construct and resolve conflicts in individuals' identities informs the existing literature of the deep identity-related meanings associated with a muscular physique and its potential benefit in helping people achieve coherence in the sense of self and identities.

**Muscularity as identity capital.** Muscularity as a form of capital is not a novel concept as existing research has frequently utilised Bourdieu's (1986a) concept of cultural capital to interpret the desires for muscularity. For example, many researchers exploring muscularity and the gym frame muscularity as a form of physical and bodily capital (Edmonds, 2018; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Harvey et al., 2014; Hutson, 2013; Shilling, 2003; Wacquant, 1995). This physical capital interpretation appears to focus on muscularity's tangible and visual nature, which risks assuming a superficiality to muscularity's role within people's lives and potentially downplaying the deeper identity functions it may serve. Some researchers have provided an identity-specific context for muscularity (e.g., masculine capital) and allude to the enhancement of masculine identities

and the compensation for feminine or marginalised behaviours and characteristics through a muscular physique (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013). The relatively specific suggestions of physical and bodily capital and the identity-specific interpretation of masculine capital may be confined to particular contexts, which may not capture the broader utility and meanings for muscularity demonstrated by the current thesis.

As the thesis progressed the interpretation of muscularity as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986b) moved from a masculine specific (e.g., masculine capital; de Visser et al., 2009) to a more global identity perspective (e.g., Côté, 2016). The initial masculine identities discussed in chapters 4 and 5 stimulated the theoretical interpretation of muscularity as a source of masculine capital for the participants' construction and performance of their male identities. The findings in chapter 6, however, progressed this interpretation and muscularity's broader role as a source of capital in other identity performances, which informed the use of Côté's (2016) more universal concept of identity capital.

The current proposal of muscularity as a valuable form of identity capital fits within the suggestion of an identity performance narrative (Côté, 2016). Specifically, muscularity appeared to be a tangible form of identity capital that played a symbolic role in constructing, mastering, and maintaining the participants' identity performance narratives (Côté, 2016; Côté & Levine, 2002; Kroger, 2007). Muscularity appeared to interact with other intangible forms of capital, such as self-esteem, confidence, and resilience, which often represented the desired attributes that benefitted the individuals' various identity performances.

Possessing both sociological (tangible) and psychological (intangible) capital is said to improve one's abilities to navigate their social environments, aid life transitions, reduce health-risk behaviours, and improves one's general well-being (Côté, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2010b). Chapter 6 shows how muscularity provided individuals with increased self-esteem, confidence, and the psychological power to cope at times of

challenge (e.g., family deaths) and negotiate the demands of their occupational roles. The current thesis adds to the muscularity and identity literature, by framing muscularity as not only a socially versatile resource, but also one that can ignite and stimulate other intangible forms of capital (e.g., self-esteem and coping), which contributes to an improved sense of self and identity performances.

### **How do the participants' stories of muscular desire develop over time?**

The construction of these different contextual meanings appeared to be shaped by various sociocultural forces. The current thesis demonstrates both the early familial and ongoing social field influences that construct and shape the muscular projects (e.g., functionality) and the attributed identity-related meanings (e.g., occupational competency) within individuals' performance narratives.

**Familial male role models.** Existing research offers suggestions that young men's identity construction and development is guided by observations, interactions, and implicit messages they experience from their fathers (Harris III & Harper, 2008; MacNaughton, 2006; Mormon & Floyd, 2006; Mussen & Distler, 1959). The existent quantitative muscularity research shows links between family influence, peer comparison, and the internalisation and desire for a muscular physique (Karazsia & Crowther, 2010; Shoemaker & Furman, 2010; Rodgers et al., 2012), but these lack insight into the context of these influences and comparisons. Existing qualitative research that explores the interaction between male family interactions and the infusion and reinforcement of muscularity into a masculine identity offers additional context. Specifically, some researchers describe the often negative, demeaning, and victimising relationships that appear to stimulate desires to be more muscular (Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005). The current studies provide additional insight into the different contextual messages and meanings offered by male family members, that fuel and shape some individuals' muscular desires.

For example, chapters 4 and 5 identified respected familial male role models, with particular emphasis on fathers, as key early influencers of the individuals' muscular context and the infusion of muscularity into the participants' masculine identities. The current participants discussed the different muscular messages imposed on them through their familial observations and interactions. Some expressed an early focus on physical stature and the muscularity of their fathers and brothers (see chapters 4 and 5). Others, however, did not directly relate to their role models' physiques or muscularity, but instead described their observation of more functional attributes (e.g., strength and physical capability; chapters 4 and 5).

Whether the current men expressed initial interests in physical appearances or functional attributes, all their stories reflected the social influence of the respected family men in their lives and the infusion of muscularity into these men's developing masculine identities. For example, some men described their muscularity as direct imitations of their father's or brother's large muscular, masculine, physiques, and others expressed the representation of their observed masculine attributes (e.g., hard work, dedication, and sacrifice) as motives for their muscular desires (see chapters 4 and 5).

The current thesis builds on the limited existing research into familial influences on muscular desires by suggesting that not all individuals' early infusions of muscularity stem from ridicule or a feeling of inadequacy. Instead the current findings propose that some men experience positive effects that generate identity blueprints to shape their muscular desires and respected masculinities in homage to their role models. Such findings emphasise the importance of exploring diverse personal stories and lived experiences to more fully understand the development of muscular desires and the different meanings that are instilled into a muscular physique. Exploring various personal experience will avoid making generalised assumptions about the development of muscular desires.

**Social field influences.** Alongside the early, family, influences, the current PhD studies demonstrated an ongoing social construction of muscular projects and meanings as



part of the participants' identities. Many researchers have explored the realms of sport and the gym in search of the motives and meanings behind muscular development. They capture some of the sociocultural forces of the gym and sport that emphasise a muscular physique as a valuable part of masculinity and the construction of a bodybuilder's social identity (Andrews et al., 2005; Andreasson, 2014; Coquet et al., 2016; Klein, 1993; Messner, 1990; Young et al., 1994). For example, some researchers offer brief insight into the physical geography and sectorisation in the gym that may inform bodybuilding norms (Andrews et al., 2005; Coquet et al., 2016) and discuss the ethnophysiological education individuals receive in the bodybuilding subculture (Coquet et al., 2016; Monaghan, 1999). These studies make some reference to the different social processes involved in shaping individuals' perceptions, actions, and desire, such as the language and training methods used (Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 1999). As previously mentioned, however, the studies that explore the gym and sport often adopt a subculture or identity specific lens (e.g., bodybuilding and masculinity respectively).

Similarly, the current thesis shares the experiences (e.g., emasculation and respect; chapters 4 and 5) comparisons (e.g., gym and sporting peers; chapters 4 and 5), and cultural features (e.g., physical geography and heroes; chapter 6) within the social fields of the gym and sport that appear to guide individuals' desires for muscularity and its value in constructing and performing successful identities. The current thesis advances the existing findings in a couple of ways. Firstly, the current studies offer additional depth to the cultural processes and shaping of muscular meanings, desires, and identities within the social field of the gym, such as detailing the significant influential individuals (e.g., coaches), clothing, and language that both shaped and facilitated the enactment of the participants' desired identities and signified their particular muscular projects. Secondly, the current thesis supports the idea that specific muscular projects and desires are socially dependent and constructed via a range of sociocultural influences, which adds to the

proposal that muscularity is a dynamic concept that may hold different symbolic meanings for various people in different social contexts.

The social construction of the different bodily-contexts and identity-related meanings assigned to muscularity in the current thesis was interpreted through a Bourdieusian lens. The current thesis generally supports the use of Bourdieu's (1986a, 1990) proposals of social field, habitus, and taste in the construction of individuals' identities and practices. It was apparent in the current thesis that the social environments (e.g., the gym) and the characters within these fields played an influential part shaping the muscular attitudes and values (i.e., habitus), which informed the individuals' specific muscular desires (i.e., tastes) and their identity construction and associated muscle building projects (i.e., practices). The current findings inform future research of the need to apply Bourdieu's concepts to multiple muscle-related fields and subcultures to further understand the range of social influences, values, projects, and identities associated with muscularity and its role in various identities.

## **Conclusions**

The current findings fulfilled the purpose of the thesis by identifying the socially constructed identity-fuelled meanings and narratives that guided and framed the individuals' muscular projects and desires for strong and muscled physiques. Specifically, muscularity's positive influence (e.g., resolving conflict) within the performance of multiple self-identities (as identity capital) appeared to inform the current participants of the value in developing a muscular physique. These successful identity performances, and the symbolic meanings and connotations that muscularity represented within them, served to support and motivate the individuals' muscular desires.

The current findings also demonstrate the importance of considering individuals' life-history and prolonged social interactions when seeking to better understand their relationships with muscularity, the development of muscular desires, and their role in individuals' identities. The value muscularity held within the current participants identity

performances was stimulated by various social observations and interactions with familial role models and various sociocultural process.

Ultimately, muscular desires in the current study appeared to be more complex than existing research may suggest and are potentially underpinned by multiple body- and identity-related meanings. These suggestions inform future research that attempting to generalise people's desires for muscularity as a superficial desire for bigger muscles or restricting a muscular physique to a specific identity (e.g., masculinity) may not be suitable. Instead we may need to embrace individual diversity, complexity, and the social fluidity of muscular desires and muscularity's role as identity capital in various identity performance narratives. In doing so, we can better articulate the versatility of muscularity and the different identity-related meanings it can have, which may help explain the ever-rising engagement in muscle building activities in modern society.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future research as previous discussed could adopt a broader perspective for muscular desires that is not exclusively focused on achieving generalisability. By adopting a more interpretivist epistemological standpoint and conducting more in-depth methodologies (e.g., narrative inquiry) research could embrace the social constructed diversity of muscular desires and share the various muscular projects that inform these desires. Such an approach would encourage the view that the muscle-building culture is a network of different social groups and identities with different socially and culturally constructed meanings and agendas associated with muscularity.

Additionally, future research could expand on the current thesis and apply the concept of muscularity as identity capital within identity performance narratives to exploration of other weight training subcultures and social identities. Doing so may provide support for the current proposals, but also identify other narrative themes that may frame individuals desires and quests for muscularity and the associated construction, resolution, and performance of their identities.

By seeking to capture people's rich and extensively detailed stories meant that others' experiences, views, and perceptions were left unturned. I sacrificed breadth and a range of experiences to achieve the goal sharing the in-depth personal meanings and experiences. Exploring the personal and context-specific narratives in the current thesis generated a richer understanding of muscular meanings, experiences, and desires. Given the subjectivity and social construction of identity, however, the current narratives and experiences I present may only be some of many. Future research could explore voices in additional social contexts, groups, and environments, such as other training or non-training cultures.

Additionally, the goal of seeking depth in the current thesis and engaging in interpersonal methods, such as interviews and participant observations, means I was potentially limited by the willingness of the participants to discuss potentially sensitive topics. Designing and conducting the study the way I did, such as using my previous patients and building a rapport over-time in the ethnography, instilled some trust in me and made the participants more comfortable in sharing their experiences. There is still a possibility that topics were left uncovered or experiences may have been diluted to protect the participants, but the responses presented are a reflection of the stories constructed at the time of the studies and give an in-depth critical insight into the current participants' muscular desires and their role in their identities.

The current methodologies consisted of active involvement of myself in the collection and construction of the narrative data, which some more traditional scholars may consider a limitation and perceived me to have a biased influence on the interpretation of the findings. The current epistemological and ontological perspectives, however, embrace this social construction and subjectivity. The interactions and interpretations that generated the data and findings I present reflect the social co-construction of reality and are bound within the specific contexts, space, and time of their occurrence. The interpretations

presented in the current thesis are not exhaustive and nor do they represent a definitive insight. Instead presenting my personal values gave readers an opportunity to understand the origins of my interpretations, challenge and question them, which could stimulate their own additional questions and understandings of the data.

Not being trained in creative writing, I feel that I took a risk in attempting to construct evocative fragments and representations of the participants' experiences. My bold decision to engage in new, to me, methodologies was risky. Some may judge my work and feel I do not do justice to creative representations. Despite the risks and potential criticism, however, I felt that the potentially sensitive, emotive, and distressing subject of muscular desires and their effects may be suited to the more artistic and evocative analysis and presentation of data. I minimised the limitations of my evocative writing by seeking help from critical friends trained in English language and creative writing. I appreciate that my writing skills are still, and always will be, developing, but to ensure studies were credible, offered contribution, resonance, and impact I consistently presented the evaluative criteria that informed my studies and the actions I took to meet each criterion.

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## Appendix A: Interview Study Risk Assessment



Health and Safety Unit

Risk Assessment			
Building		Date of Risk Assessment	07/08/2015
School/Service Department	Sport and Exercise Sciences	Assessment carried out by	Ieuan Cranswick
Location		Signed	
Activity	One-to-One Interviews	Persons consulted during the Risk Assessment	
<b>STEP 1</b> What are the Hazards? <i>Spot hazards by</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walking around the workplace</li> <li>• Speaking to employees</li> <li>• Checking manufacturers instructions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One-to-one interview</li> <li>• Interviewees could become unsettled by the interview</li> <li>• The emergence of sensitive or controversial data</li> <li>• Exposure of personal details and data</li> </ul>		
<b>STEP 2</b> Who might be harmed and how? <i>Identify groups of people.</i> <i>Staff and students are obvious, but please remember</i>  <i>Some staff/students have particular needs</i>  <i>People who may not be present all the time</i>  <i>Members of the public</i>  <i>How your work affects others if you share a workplace</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher – physical harm if interviewee becomes aggressive, psychological or emotional upset as a result of topics that emerge</li> <li>• Interviewee – psychological or emotional distress as a result of the topics that emerge, exposure of personal details and data</li> </ul>		



<p><b>STEP 3 (a)</b> What are you already doing?</p> <p><i>What is already in place to reduce the likelihood of harm, or to make any harm less serious</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have avenues of support in place for both the researcher and the interviewees should any negative effects occur (e.g., HPCP registered psychologist, and harm-reduction team)</li> <li>• Obtain consent and provide a full explanation of the study, including risks and avenues of support.</li> <li>• Keeping all data stored securely on a password protected computer.</li> </ul>
<p><b>STEP 3 (b)</b> What further action is needed?</p> <p><i>Compare what you are already doing with good practice. If there is a gap, please list what needs to be done.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlight a point of contact should any controversial topics such as illegal acts occur and seek advice on what to do in this situation</li> </ul>
<p><b>STEP 4</b> How will you put the assessment into action?</p> <p><i>Please remember to prioritise. Deal with the hazards that are high risk and have serious consequences first</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will make sure all avenues of support are in place and consent is obtained prior to engaging in any data collection.</li> <li>• We will then keep all personal data locked away or stored on a password protected computer.</li> </ul>

**Review as necessitated by changes.**

**Appendix B: Interview Study Protocol*****Title:***

The Response to Injury and its Threat to Muscularity: A Qualitative Interview Study

***Purpose:***

The purpose of the proposed study is to examine the experiences of injury and rehabilitation in athletes who have a high desire for muscularity.

***Introduction:***

The pressure to be muscular often encourages muscle-related behaviours such as weight training (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007). A phenomenon yet to be explored is the interaction between a desire for muscularity and the response to an injury. If an individual has a high desire for muscularity how does this influence their injury experience, and also how does the injury then interact with the self-perceptions such as DFM? An integrated model of the response to injury highlights the cognitive appraisals that appear to be related to injury (Weise-Bjornstal et al., 1995, 1998). These cognitive appraisals of the injured athlete appears to significantly correlate with the disturbance of mood (Daly et al., 1995). One of these cognitive appraisals is the self-perception of the athletes (Weise-Bjornstal et al., 1998). Self-perceptions such as self-esteem and self-worth have been examined in the literature. Studies have demonstrated lowered self-perceptions, such as levels of self-esteem, in both recently and late injured athletes (Chan & Grossman, 1988; Leddy et al., 1994; Connelly, 1991).

If an athlete possesses certain self-perceptions regarding their muscularity there may be some element of threat to these perceptions that comes with being injured. The element of threat may then influence behaviours related to DFM to overcome the threat, some of which may be risky or detrimental to health and the rehabilitation process, such as training with injury. The existing literature doesn't explore the interaction between DFM and the injury response. The proposed study represents a novel approach to examining the area because they will adopt qualitative interviews and a life history approach in a previously unstudied population; recently injured athletes.

***Protocol:******Participant Recruitment***

We will recruit 8 male individuals who all engage in regular strength and power based sports and weight training activities at least 3 times per week (when not injured), frequently uses legal dietary supplementation, and have undergone and completed treatment and rehabilitation for a recent musculoskeletal injury. The recruitment process will be one of convenience and completed through the researchers role as a therapist. The participants will not be approached until they have completed their rehabilitation and treatment program. Once the athletes' rehabilitation has finished they will be approached on a personal and individual basis by the researcher. They will be given a study information sheet along with an informed consent to participate in a series of interviews as detailed in the following section.

***Method***

Once the participants have completed the duration of their treatment and rehabilitation program they will be asked to take part in an interview with the lead researcher, who was also their therapist. The interview will take an open ended and life history approach. An opening question will enquire about their injury and rehabilitation experience. The aim is to get as much information about experiences at the time of and after the injury, as well as throughout the rehabilitation process.

To aid this interview a timeline will be presented to the participant and they will be asked to detail specific life experiences and events aiming to adopt a whole life perspective in order to understand the background experiences of the athletes and build a picture of the participants' life experiences. This may help a greater understanding of the athletes' interpretations and responses to injury. A follow up interview will be used in order to focus on specific areas identified in the initial interview and timeline.

Interviews will all occur in a location and at a time selected by the participant. The interviews will all be voice recorded, with consent, and then transcribed.

### *Analysis*

A narrative analysis will be used to disseminate the findings. This involves structurally analysing the narratives told by the participants looking for the key features that shape the whole narrative (Smith et al., 2005). These features will then be used to form genres which will be used to cluster together similar narratives given by each of the participants where by similar expressions, features, and experiences are highlighted. These genres will then be presented and supported by specific narratives and quotes from the life-history interviews and timeline. By using this approach, a personal and social representation (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) of the injury and rehabilitation experiences of the participants, and how these are interpreted in light of their other life experiences.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The participants will have a dependent relationship with the researcher during the rehabilitation and treatment process which may cause conflict of interests and roles. To overcome this the interviews will not take place until a) the dependent relationship has expired and the rehabilitation process has been completed and b) informed consent has been given by the participants.

We do not anticipate any distress or psychological discomfort as a result of the interviews however there is a low risk of sensitive topics and information being shared. Despite this being a low risk, avenues of support and points of contact will be given to the participants such as the Samaritans should any discomfort occur.

### *Confidentiality*

Complete confidentiality will be ensured throughout the study. Pseudonyms will be used when presenting the personal narratives, views, and opinions. The data collected, and any identifiable, and personal data will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. All data will be stored on a password protected computer and any hard copies of data or audio recordings will be stored securely, and locked away.

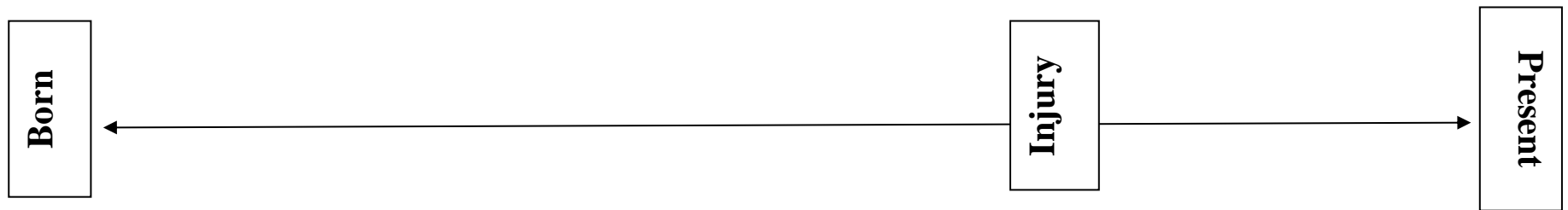
### *Interview Question*

The interview will be based around one open ended question looking to allow the participant to openly discuss their experience of their injury and rehabilitation and anything that may have influenced their experiences.

1. Can you tell me a bit about the experience of your injury?

Additional follow up questions will be guided by the participants' responses in attempt to capture the role of muscularity perceptions in their injury experiences.

The following timeline will also be given to the participant and they will be asked to detail any significant life experiences or events that may have occurred before during and after the injury.



**Appendix C: Interview Study Participant Information Sheet****Title of Project**

The Response to Injury and its Threat to Muscularity: A Qualitative Interview Study

**Name of Researcher and School/Faculty**

Ieuan Cranswick, School of Sport and Exercise Science, Faculty of Science

Dr David A. Tod, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Faculty of Science

You are being invited to be part of a research study. Prior to involvement it is important that you understand the aims and purpose of the research and what your role would involve. Please thoroughly read the following and take the opportunity to ask any questions.

**1. What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of the proposed study is to examine the experiences of injury and rehabilitation in athletes who have a high desire for muscularity.

**2. Do I have to take part?**

You are not obliged to participate and doing so is entirely your own choice. If you do decide to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form prior to any involvement. Throughout the study you have the right to withdraw at any time.

**3. What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be invited to participate in the study if you are a male who engages in regular strength and power based sports and weight training activities at least 3 times per week (when not injured), frequently use legal dietary supplementation, and have undergone and completed treatment and rehabilitation for a recent musculoskeletal injury sufficient to stop you training.

You will be involved in 2 interviews with the researcher and asked an open ended question regarding your experience of your injury and the rehabilitation process. The aim is to get as much information about experiences at the time of and after the injury, as well as throughout the rehabilitation process. To aid this interview you will be presented with a timeline and then asked to detail specific life experiences aiming to adopt a whole life perspective in order to understand your background experiences and build a picture of your life experiences. This will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

The follow up interview will be used to focus on specific areas identified in the initial interview and timeline, and again will last approximately 30-40 minutes. Interviews will all occur in a location and at a time of your choice. The interviews will all be voice recorded, with consent, and then transcribed.

**4. Are there any risks / benefits involved?**

We do not anticipate any distress or psychological discomfort as a result of the interviews however there is a low risk of sensitive topics and information being shared. Despite this being a low risk, avenues of support and points of contact will be provided such as the Samaritans (08457 90 90 90) or Robert Morris who is a HCPC registered psychologist at Liverpool John Moore's University should any discomfort occur.

You may feel better after sharing their experiences. By partaking in the proposed study but you will also be helping contribute to informing future avenues of research into the drive for muscularity (DFM), self-identity, and muscularity self-perceptions. This will help explore a previously unexplored population in the DFM literature and thus provide direction for the design of future channels of support for individuals who experience negative effects of muscularity self-perceptions or a high DFM within this population.

**5. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

Your involvement in the study along with any identifiable information, opinions, or responses collected during the study will be kept completely confidential. The data collected, and personal details, will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. All reference to your responses or any specific individuals will be presented under pseudonyms throughout all written reports and transcripts to protect your identity. All data will be stored on a protected LJMU drive and any hard copies of data or audio recordings will be stored securely locked away in the researcher's office. The audio recordings will be deleted off the recording device once stored on the LJMU drive. Should you have any questions about confidentiality do not hesitate to ask.

**Contact Details of Researcher**

Ieuan Cranswick, [I.Cranswick@2015.ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:I.Cranswick@2015.ljmu.ac.uk)

**Contact Details of Academic Supervisor**

Dr D. A. Tod, [D.A.Tod@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:D.A.Tod@ljmu.ac.uk)

**If you any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with the researcher in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact [researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk) and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.**

**Appendix D: Interview Study Consent Sheet****Title:**

The Response to Injury and its Threat to Muscularity: A Qualitative Interview Study

**Researcher:**

Ieuan Cranswick, School of Sport and Exercise Science, Faculty of Science

Dr David A. Tod, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Faculty of Science

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights.

☐

3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential

☐

4. I agree to take part in the above interview study

☐

5. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded and I am happy to proceed

☐

6. I understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future publications or presentations but that such quotes will be anonymised.

☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent  
(if different from researcher)

Date

Signature



## Appendix E: Ethnography Risk Assessment



Health and Safety Unit

Risk Assessment			
Building		Date of Risk Assessment	
School/Service Department	Sport and Exercise Sciences	Assessment carried out by	Ieuan Cranswick
Location		Signed	
Activity	One-to-One Interviews, Observations in the Gym	Persons consulted during the Risk Assessment	
<b>STEP 1</b> What are the Hazards? <i>Spot hazards by</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Walking around the workplace</i></li> <li>• <i>Speaking to employees</i></li> <li>• <i>Checking manufacturers instructions</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One-to-one interview</li> <li>• Hazards around the gym during observations</li> <li>• Interviewees could become unsettled by the interview</li> <li>• The emergence of sensitive or controversial data</li> <li>• Exposure of personal details and data</li> </ul>		
<b>STEP 2</b> Who might be harmed and how? <i>Identify groups of people.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher – physical harm if interviewee becomes aggressive, psychological or emotional upset as a result of topics that emerge, or any injury as a result of gym related hazards</li> <li>• Interviewee – psychological or emotional distress as a result of the topics that emerge, exposure of personal details and data</li> </ul>		

<p><i>Staff and students are obvious, but please remember Some staff/students have particular needs</i></p> <p><i>People who may not be present all the time</i></p> <p><i>Members of the public</i></p> <p><i>How your work affects others if you share a workplace</i></p>	
<p><b>STEP 3 (a)</b> What are you already doing?</p> <p><i>What is already in place to reduce the likelihood of harm, or to make any harm less serious</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have avenues of support in place for both the researcher and the interviewees should any negative effects occur.</li> <li>• Obtain consent and provide a full explanation of the study, including risks and avenues of support.</li> <li>• Keeping all data stored securely on a password protected computer.</li> <li>• Follow all health and safety and risk assessment guidelines that are in place at the gym establishment</li> </ul>
<p><b>STEP 3 (b)</b> What further action is needed?</p> <p><i>Compare what you are already doing with good practice. If there is a gap, please list what needs to be done.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlight a point of contact should any controversial topics such as illegal acts occur and seek advice on what to do in this situation</li> </ul>

**STEP 4**

How will you put the assessment into action?

*Please remember to prioritise. Deal with the hazards that are high risk and have serious consequences first*

- We will make sure all avenues of support are in place and consent is obtained prior to engaging in any data collection.
- We will make sure we are fully aware of any safety procedures and protocols prior to engaging in any observations.
- We will then keep all personal data locked away or stored on a password protected computer.

**Review as necessitated by changes.**

**Appendix F: Ethnography Study Protocol*****Title:***

An ethnographic exploration of gym experiences in those with a desire for muscularity.

***Purpose:***

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the daily gym experiences of individuals with a desire for muscularity. The specific focus is on how their interactions within the environment influence their muscularity-related desires and their behaviour.

***Introduction:***

The pressure to be muscular often encourages muscle-related behaviours such as weight training (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007). The perceived pressure appears to be linked with being constantly exposed to muscular images and physiques (Leit et al., 2001). The increased popularity in the fitness industry creates more opportunities for males to expose themselves to these pressures (Jung, Forbes, & Chan, 2010; Maguire, 2002; Morrison, Morrison, Hopkins, & Rowan, 2004). The exposure to highly muscular physiques, and the internalisation of muscular physiques has been correlated with the drive for muscularity (DFM) (Giles & Close, 2008; Jung et al., 2010; Karazsia & Crowther, 2010; Morrison, Morrison, & Hopkins, 2003; Morrison et al., 2004; Smolak & Stein, 2010).

The pressures men perceive often leads them to do all they can to achieve this 'ideal' physique. Several behaviours have been positively correlated with DFM such as weightlifting, diet manipulation, nutritional supplementation, and substance abuse (Chittester & Hausenblas, 2009; Litt & Dodge, 2008; McPherson, McCarthy, McCreary, & McMillan, 2010; Morrison et al., 2004; Parent & Moradi, 2010).

***Protocol:******Participant Recruitment***

Initially, after gaining consent from the gym establishment, participants will be observed by the researcher who adopts a participant-observer role as a PT and gym user. They will be observed during their daily training routines where conversations, behaviours, and interactions will be noted using a field note journal. Based upon specific observations some participants will be selected for interviews. We will aim to recruit 15 participants for observations (they can be male or female), and 15 clients and 8 staff for interviews. The interview participants will be approached by the researcher on a personal and individual basis, given a study information and informed consent sheet, and invited to partake in an interview. The selection criteria for observation and interview are (a) trains with weights at least 3 times per week in the gym, (b) has a clear interest in their own muscularity, and (c) frequent use of legal dietary supplementation.

***Method***

An ethnographic, or field work, approach, will be used whereby the researcher will observe the gym users as they go through their daily training regimes in a public gym setting. The researcher will keep a field note journal which will record specific events, behaviours, interactions, or conversations that have been observed. In the journal these notes will be timed, dated, and include a description of the area of the environment they took place. This will give an overall picture for the observations noted. Any informal conversations that take place between the participants and the researcher will also be noted within the journal. The researcher will take a participant-observer role, this means that the researcher will be both observing participants but also interacting with them as a participant in their behaviour. The researcher works in the gym as a personal trainer but also trains there himself achieving this participant role, but will also be making observations as he carries out his personal trainer duties.

Some participants will be invited to take part in an interview. The interview protocol will be semi-structured, and questions will be based upon specific observations made within the gym. The general topics will be regarding experiences both outside and within the gym with relation to their desire for muscularity. The interviews will take place in a location and at a time selected by the participant. As well as gym users the staff from the gym will also be interviewed, these staff include other PTs, receptionists, managers, and cleaning staff. These interview questions will be based around their experiences and perceptions of the clients (i.e. how they act and conversations they have). Informed consent will be gained prior to any interviews. All interviews will be voice recorded, with consent, and transcribed for analysis.

### *Analysis*

Once all the data is collected a narrative analysis will be used to present the findings. This involves structurally analysing the narratives told by the participants looking for the key features that shape the whole narrative (Smith et al., 2005). These features will then be used to form genres. Genres will be chosen based upon what topics and common occurrences surface from the data. These genres will then be expressed using scenarios from the observed data as well as interview responses. By using this approach a personal and social representation of the daily lives and experiences of the observed individuals can be presented (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). As well as the training individuals we can provide narratives from the employees and gain an insight into the perspectives of these individuals. This will create a larger picture of the regular experiences and interactions that occur in the gym and training environment.

### *Ethical Considerations*

We do not anticipate any distress or psychological discomfort as a result of the interviews however there is a low risk of sensitive topics and information being shared. Despite this being a low risk avenues of support and points of contact will be given to the participants such as the Samaritans should any discomfort occur.

### *Confidentiality*

Complete confidentiality will be ensured throughout the study. The data collected and any identifiable, and personal data will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.

All data will be stored on a password protected computer and any hard copies of data or audio recordings will be stored securely, and locked away.

### *Interview Questions*

The interview will be semi-structured and based around open ended questions that will be guided by my observations. I will be looking to allow the participant to openly discuss their experience of the gym, weight training, and muscularity related experiences.

Some examples of general questions may be:

1. Tell me a little about yourself?
  - a. Background?
  - b. Hobbies?
  - c. Daily Activities/Routine?
2. Can you describe your typical training day?
  - a. Training
    - i. Type/Frequency of training?
    - ii. Feelings associated with training?
  - b. Nutrition
    - i. Dietary control/regime
    - ii. Supplementation
3. What made you start weight training?
4. How important is weight training to you?
5. How does weight training impact/benefit your life?
6. Can you describe your relationship with others in the gym?
  - a. Peers
  - b. Training partners
  - c. Staff
7. Can you describe your relationships outside of the gym?
  - i. Family
  - ii. Peers/Friends
  - iii. Colleagues

**Appendix G: Ethnography Participant Information Sheet****Title of Project**

An ethnographic exploration of the daily gym experiences of those with a desire for muscularity.

**Name of Researcher and School/Faculty**

Ieuan Cranswick, School of Sport and Exercise Science, Faculty of Science

Dr David A. Tod, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Faculty of Science

You are being invited to be part of a research study. Prior to involvement it is important that you understand the aims and purpose of the research and what your role would involve. Please thoroughly read the following and take the opportunity to ask any questions.

**6. What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the daily gym experiences of individuals with a desire for muscularity. The specific focus is on how their interactions within the environment influence their muscularity-related desires and behaviour.

**7. Do I have to take part?**

You are not obliged to participate and doing so is entirely your own choice. If you do decide to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form prior to any involvement. Throughout the study you have the right to withdraw at any time.

**8. What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be invited to participate in the study if you engage in regular gym training activities at least 3 times per week, frequently use dietary supplementation, and have a high interest in your own muscularity.

You will be invited to participate in an interview with the researcher and asked open ended questions, in a semi-structured manner, regarding your experience of the gym, weight training, and muscularity related experiences. This will last approximately 1 hour.

A follow up interview may be used in order to focus on specific areas identified in the initial interview and again will last approximately an hour. Interviews will all be conducted in a location and at a time of your selection. The interviews will all be voice recorded, with consent, and then transcribed.

**9. Are there any risks / benefits involved?**

We do not anticipate any distress or psychological discomfort as a result of the interviews however there is a low risk of sensitive topics and information being shared. Despite this being a low risk, avenues of support and points of contact will be provided such as the Samaritans (08457 90 90 90) should any discomfort occur. Further support for specific

sensitive topics can also be found at needle exchange, and local drug support services.

Forward Leeds is one service that offers support for drug and alcohol related issues (0113 8872477). Local needle exchange details can be found at

<http://womensdirectory.leedscounselling.org.uk/needle-exchanges/>,

You may feel better after sharing their experiences. By partaking in the proposed study but you will also be helping contribute to informing future avenues of research into the drive for muscularity (DFM), self-identity, and muscularity self-perceptions. The novel approach to this study will provide direction for the design of future channels of support for individuals who experience negative effects of muscularity self-perceptions or a high DFM within this population.

#### **10. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

Your involvement in the study along with any identifiable information, opinions, or responses collected during the study will be kept completely confidential. The data collected, and personal details, will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. All data will be stored on a password protected computer and any hard copies of data or audio recordings will be stored securely. Should you have any questions about confidentiality do not hesitate to ask.

#### **Contact Details of Researcher**

Ieuan Cranswick, [I.Cranswick@2015.ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:I.Cranswick@2015.ljmu.ac.uk)

#### **Contact Details of Academic Supervisor**

Dr D. A. Tod, [D.A.Tod@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:D.A.Tod@ljmu.ac.uk)

**If you any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with the researcher in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact [researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk) and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.**



**Appendix H: Ethnography Participant Consent Sheet****Title:**

An ethnographic exploration of gym experiences in those with a desire for muscularity.

**Researcher:**

Ieuan Cranswick, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Faculty of Science

Dr David A. Tod, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Faculty of Science

7. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily

☐

8. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights.

☐

9. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential

☐

10. I agree to take part in the above study (*if appropriate please specify the type of study or particular intervention you are seeking consent for – eg focus group, interview, training programme*)

☐

11. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded and I am happy to proceed

☐

12. I understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future publications or presentations but that such quotes will be anonymised.

☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent

Date

Signature

## **Appendix I: Ethnography Gatekeeper Information Sheet**

### **Title of Project:**

An ethnographic exploration of gym experiences in those with a desire for muscularity.

### **Name of Researcher:**

Ieuan Cranswick, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Faculty of Science

The reason for this letter is to request permission to access your facilities as part of a PhD research project.

### **What is the purpose of the study/rationale for the project?**

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the daily gym experiences of individuals with a desire for muscularity.

### **What we are asking you to do?**

As part of the research project I would like to observe the clients who engage in recreational weight training at your facilities. I will be observing their training routines, behaviours, and interactions with others within your establishment. I will record field notes documenting observations and any conversations that may occur between clients, staff, or the researcher. No conversations will be prompted we are looking to gain insight into the natural conversations that occur.

Based upon observations some individuals, both staff and clients, may be invited for an interview with the researcher. These interviews will discuss the experiences of the individuals within the gym environment, self-perceptions regarding muscularity, and general experiences of these individuals. As the gatekeeper you will be responsible for providing consent for the research team to enter your establishment and undertake our observations and interviews. You will also be invited to allow your staff to engage in interviews and conversations with the research team. Any interviews will also seek informed consent from the individuals.

Given your close relationship with your clients I would like to use this to spread the awareness of my role, presence, and the research project. I invite you to explain and discuss my presence and the research project with your clients when you engage with them, and any clients who ask. This ensures an active effort is made to make any clients aware of the researcher's role and presence. Any contact made with clients or any introductions made between myself and clients will consist of full informed explanations of the study. This will create a gradual awareness of my presence and the study aims. If possible I would like to put up some notices of my presence and my role as a researcher. I do not anticipate any conflict of interests as I will simply be there to make observations and will not intrude or interrupt any work or training that takes place. Conversations will only be initiated if clients are willing or approach myself.

### **Why do we need access to your facilities/staff/clients?**

I am looking to undertake a study looking at the experiences of individuals who regularly engage in weight training and gym activities. Specifically, I am looking to understand how a desire for muscularity may play a part in the experiences within the gym. To do this I

need to observe individuals within their natural training environment, hence the desire to use your facilities and interact with your staff and clients.

**If you are willing to assist in the study what happens next?**

Before I undertake any observations or interviews I will seek written consent from yourselves and any individuals who agree to participation in any interviews. Once consent has been gained you will be fully informed about the study background, purpose, protocol, and will have the opportunity to have any questions answered.

**How we will use the Information?**

I will use the data to understand the common experiences and interactions that take place in the gym environment. This will be done through presenting short narratives and clustering similar narratives under specific genres. These narratives will be based on the observations and interview responses.

**Will the name of my organisation taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

All information gathered will be kept locked away in a locked cabinet or on a password protected computer. The data will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team which consists of myself and my supervisory team. Anonymity will be maintained wherever possible and all specific references to individuals will be given a pseudonym, and the gym name and location will remain anonymous and also given a pseudonym. Once the project has been completed the data will be destroyed. Participants will be given the opportunity to remove or modify any views, opinions, and responses before they are published or made public.

**What will taking part involve? What should I do now?**

You will simply need to sign and return the gatekeeper consent form attached, and if you are happy allow the researcher to carry out their observations and interviews within your establishment.

Should you have any comments or questions regarding this research, you may contact the researchers:

**Contact Details of Principle Researcher**

Ieuan Cranswick, [I.Cranswick@2015.ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:I.Cranswick@2015.ljmu.ac.uk)

**Contact Details of Academic Supervisor**

Dr D. A. Tod, [D.A.Tod@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:D.A.Tod@ljmu.ac.uk)

**If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with the researcher in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact [researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk) and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.**

## Appendix J: Ethnography Gatekeeper Consent Sheet

**Title of Project:**

An ethnographic exploration of gym experiences in those with a desire for muscularity.

**Name of Researchers:**

Ieuan Cranswick, School of Sport and Exercise Science, Faculty of Science

David. A. Tod, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Faculty of Science

Please tick to confirm your understanding of the study and that you are happy for your organisation to take part and your facilities to be used to host parts of the project.

By signing this form you (the gatekeeper) agree to allow the research team to enter and use your facilities to carry out observations and interviews with your clients and staff regarding the daily experiences and interactions that occur within the gym.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. I understand that participation of our organisation and members in the research is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect legal rights. ☐
3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential. ☐
4. I agree for our organisation and members to take part in the observational part of the study. ☐
5. I agree for our organisation and members to take part in the interview part of the study with personal informed consent being gained. ☐
6. I agree to conform to the data protection act ☐

Name of Gatekeeper:

Date:

Signature:

Name of Researcher:

Date:

Signature:

Name of Person taking consent:

Date:

Signature: